

## **Coming Out**

*Coming Out* is now more than ever a youth issue. Studies indicate that many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) young people are aware of their sexual orientation/gender identity by the time they are 13. Chances are that more than a few students at your middle or high school are wrestling right now with how and when to tell their friends and families they are LGB or T. Whether you are LGBT yourself or wondering how to react to a friend who has just come out to you, the following information can help you to manage your coming out experience openly and with sensitivity.

### **For LGBT Students...**

#### **Should I come out?**

There are many good reasons to come out. It can be a tremendous relief to be open about your identity and to stop investing lots of energy in keeping secrets and worrying about what might happen if others “find out.” Being honest can help to bridge that distance you may have been keeping from friends and family, and can result in closer and more meaningful relationships with loved ones. And when you’re not constantly worried about meeting others’ expectations, you can put all of your energy into being authentic—in how you dress, talk, spend your time, and date.

There are also reasons to wait to come out to others. If you are under 18 and/or financially dependent on others, you may not want to come out if there is a chance you will be kicked out of your home or left to fend for yourself. If you fear harassment, abuse, or loss of emotional support, this too may be reason to put off coming out until you are in a more secure position.

If you are unsure about whether or not to come out, take your time and think things through rather than acting impulsively. Read books or magazines by and for LGBT youth. Watch a video about LGBT issues, join an online community, or call an LGBT hotline. If there is a youth group or trusted adult to whom you can safely and confidentially turn, take advantage of this option. You may also want to keep a daily journal of your reflections, questions, thoughts and fears until you are clear as to the right path for you.

#### **Who should I tell?**

Coming out is a life-long process. There will always be new people and new situations in which you will have to decide whether or not to come out. Unfortunately there is no Magic Eight Ball to tell you “outlook good” or “very doubtful”—you will have to rely on your instincts instead. In general, you should come out first to people you really trust and who you expect will be supportive and respect confidentiality.

For many people, coming out to parents or other close family members can be an intense experience (in a positive or negative way). For this reason, you may want to consider “practicing” on others who you trust before talking to your family, or getting the advice of LGBT people who can share what it was like to come out to family members. Coming out to family can be a source of great support or great angst—your decision about which family member to come out to when is a very personal decision that you should consider thoughtfully.

If you are thinking about coming out to a teacher, guidance counselor, nurse or other “official,” you may want to check into your school’s confidentiality policy first—in some cases these professionals may be obligated to share your information with others. If you are considering coming out to friends, choose carefully—your best friends may not all be the best at keeping secrets. Whether it’s because they just can’t help spreading gossip or need support themselves in dealing with your news, not everyone is as discreet as we’d like them to be.

### **I’m ready! When and how should I come out?**

There is no definitive roadmap for how and when to come out, but there is lots of advice from those who have come out before you. Because coming out can be quite an emotional experience, some recommend writing a carefully worded letter that captures just what you want to say and gives the recipient time to absorb the news before meeting with you in person. Most people, however, do their coming out face-to-face. If this is your preferred approach, it is best to do a little planning ahead.

It is usually easiest to come out privately to one person at a time (rather than to a group, say, at Thanksgiving dinner) and to avoid bringing a friend or lover to help you deliver the news. Choose a time and day when neither of you are tired or stressed, and when there is ample time to process and discuss things. Though it may help you to plan and rehearse exactly what you want to say in advance, try to avoid giving a speech and to make it more of a two-way conversation. Most importantly, don’t ever come out because others are pressuring you to do so, when you aren’t sober, out of anger, or as a weapon to hurt someone else. Coming out can be a wonderful experience, but only when you are comfortable with your own identity and ready to share yourself with others.

### **What kind of reaction should I expect?**

Since coming out is first and foremost something that you are doing for yourself, don’t let worries about potential reactions steer you from your course (unless you fear for your safety or security). If possible, choose people to tell who you expect will give you the support and encouragement you desire. For most of us, there will be a time when we need to come out to someone who may be less than compassionate. Many people will say things out of shock or discomfort that they may not mean or realize is hurtful. It is important to remember how long it took you to come to terms with your own identity, and to be patient with others who may need time to come around. Some of those people may be distant or detached at first, so prepare yourself to deal with possible silence. Others may challenge you with difficult statements or questions, so you may want to think about how to respond to issues such as religion, your sexual activity and HIV/health status, and your willingness to get reparative therapy. Whatever comes up, take solace in the fact that most people will grow to be accepting over time and that it is not your responsibility to change the few who will never open their minds. For those who are willing to learn more, suggest books, websites, or local groups (such as PFLAG). This will not only help them to educate themselves, but will take the pressure off of you to have all of the answers. And while you’re at it, find some resources and support for yourself—coming out can be emotionally taxing and you don’t have to go it alone.

## 10 Tips for those on the receiving end...

1. It takes a lot of courage for someone to come out to you—listen to all they have to say without interrupting, judging, tuning out or buying into stereotypes about LGBT people.
2. Tell them how pleased you are that they trusted you enough to share something so personal and congratulate them on the bravery it took to be so honest.
3. Let them know that you feel the same way about them as you always have and that nothing has changed (except that you can be even closer than before).
4. Ask questions and show that you are interested in learning about their feelings and experiences. Be respectful and stay away from personal issues (sex, HIV, etc.) unless they let you know it's okay.
5. If you are feeling uncomfortable or upset, be honest. Let them know you may need some time to process everything, but acknowledge that it is *your* problem to work out and not their responsibility.
6. Remember that you cannot and should not try to change them—you have an opportunity here to support, not to reform them.
7. Ask what you can do to support them or what they need from you right now.
8. Follow up. The coming out conversation should be the first of many. Continue to check in and ask questions over time.
9. Be open to socializing with their new friends and in a variety of settings, both LGBT and straight. Let them know that they don't have to compartmentalize their lives.
10. Be an advocate. Read up on LGBT issues, wear an LGBT-friendly button or sticker, join a Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) or other LGBT group, and confront homophobia in as many ways as you can.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**PRE/POST TEST**

ACTIVITY  
**1A**

1. Tolerance means accepting people for who they are. **TRUE or FALSE**
2. Being part of a group nurtures us and makes us feel safe. **TRUE or FALSE**
3. People generally associate with other people that share the same qualities or have had similar experiences. **TRUE or FALSE**
4. Anyone who is different from you is bad or dangerous. **TRUE or FALSE**
5. Trying to put yourself in someone else's shoes is one way of becoming more tolerant. **TRUE or FALSE**
6. We do not learn intolerance from others. **TRUE or FALSE**
7. There's nothing wrong with judging someone solely on how they look. **TRUE or FALSE**
8. Everyone has a fear of others who are different from us. **TRUE or FALSE**
9. Stereotypes or prejudices are only formed about physical appearance—not economic status or religion. **TRUE or FALSE**
10. Having different kinds of people as friends can be fun. **TRUE or FALSE**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**EASY WAY OUT**

ACTIVITY  
**4**

Judging people by their looks is the easy way out. Looks don't tell us who people are on the inside. Read the scenarios below and answer the questions that follow.

Scenario 1:

*An Asian student is learning English. She's been working up the courage to practice speaking with other students. In the hallway, she passes a boy she recognizes from one of her classes and says, "Hello." He gives her a sarcastic look and says, "Me no speak Chinese. Hee hee!"*

How is the boy unfairly judging the girl? By judging the girl based on her looks, what is the boy missing?

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Scenario 2:

*A very tall boy is working on his science project during lunch. He's been trying to finish it in time for the science fair this weekend, so he's been putting in all the extra time he can find. The basketball coach walks by and says, "Forget science! YOU should be playing basketball!"*

How is the coach unfairly judging the boy? By judging him based on his looks, what is the coach missing?

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What about you?

Has anyone ever judged you unfairly based on the way you look? How did it make you feel?

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

**ACCEPTING OTHERS**

ACTIVITY  
**5**

Consider the *Tips for Tolerance* and *Tools of Tolerance* listed in Fact Sheets 1 and 2 as you read the following scenario:

*Emily, a new student in a wheelchair, enters the cafeteria at lunchtime. She smiles at the other kids, who smile back but don't have the courage to approach her. Students whisper: "I wanted to talk to her, but I didn't know what to say." "Do you think we should offer to push her, or does she want to do it herself?" "I wonder what happened to her." "She's probably mad at us because we can walk." "She probably just wants to be left alone." Emily watches other kids eating lunch together, laughing and talking. She opens her lunch and eats alone.*

**Part 1:** Answer the following questions:

1. Do you think Emily wants to be left alone?

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2. Do you think she would like the other kids to offer to push her, or do you think she would prefer to push herself? How can the other students find out?

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3. What do you think the other kids could say to her? Would you say different things to Emily than to any other person you didn't know? List some conversation openers below:

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**Part 2:** Working in groups, role play the scenario. Be sure to implement *Tips for Tolerance* and *Tools of Tolerance* (Fact Sheets 1 and 2) so that the scenario has a positive outcome.

## TIPS FOR TOLERANCE

FACT  
SHEET  
1

Tolerance means accepting people for who they are. Whether it's someone who looks different, acts different, or has a different way of life, everyone deserves to be treated decently.

1. All people are valuable. No one is better than anyone else.
2. In some ways, we are just like everyone else on Earth. We all share the same feelings. Even if people look different or come from a different place, you probably have more in common with them than you think. On the inside all people have the same basic desires, like fitting in, making friends, and having a good time.
3. In some ways, we are different from everyone else on Earth. Each of us has a unique personality and appearance.
4. Judging people by the way they look is the easy thing to do. It's harder to get to know someone. If we make somebody an outcast because of their clothes or their looks, we might miss a chance to make a good friend, somebody we have a lot in common with.
5. All people—no matter who they are, where they come from, what they believe, how they act, or what they look like—deserve respect and compassion.
6. Each of us is responsible for our own actions.
7. We should treat other people the way we want others to treat us.
8. Teasing people is wrong. Put yourself in the other person's place.
9. Sometimes it's hard to talk to someone if we feel uncomfortable, but ignoring a person for being different can hurt just as much as teasing someone for being different.
10. Making friends with a new kid could be cool. You're the first one to get to know somebody—and it makes the new kid feel better if somebody introduces him or her around.

Learning to be tolerant of others isn't always easy, but there are tools we can use to make the path a lot less bumpy. The four *tools of tolerance* outlined in the video can help us "step outside of the box" that limits the way we think about others:

1. **Examine your feelings:** Recognize that we all carry around a fear of others who are different from us. If we are truthful about our feelings, we *do* all have prejudices and stereotypes—it's part of being human. Examining them is the first step toward becoming more tolerant.
2. **Empathize with others:** This means that you should put yourself in another person's shoes and try to feel what he or she feels. Everybody has feelings. Try to empathize with a person who feels different, who feels outcast. Can you imagine what it would feel like if you were in that person's place?
3. **Understand the source of your feelings:** Explore where your own ideas about other people different from you have come from. Intolerance often comes from attitudes we've learned from others. It can also come from misdirected feelings, such as when you are angry with your mom or dad but you take it out on your little brother or sister. Where do your own feelings toward others come from?
4. **Reach out to others:** This tool of tolerance is said to be the hardest to use because it requires putting what you have learned into action, which calls for bravery—namely, doing the right thing even though it scares you. You can start to apply this last tool, which may be the most important, in small ways by making even tiny changes in how you treat others who are different from you.

If you were new to a school, you'd probably appreciate any kindness others would show toward you. What about if you were from another country? Then, not only would you not know anyone, you might be homesick for your country and struggling with learning a new language and customs. What could you do to help someone from another country feel more at ease? Below are some ideas. Can you think of other suggestions?

- Say hello to the person when you see him or her.
- Be friendly.
- Introduce the person to other students.
- Ask questions about the person's native country.
- Invite the person to join you for lunch.
- Offer to study together.
- Don't make fun of the person.
- Be patient while the person is learning English.
- Offer to help the person with language problems.
- Compliment the person (for example, "*You're a good artist*" or "*That's a nice jacket*").