The Coming Out Process

For gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people, coming out is a process of understanding, accepting, and valuing one’s sexual orientation/identity. Coming out includes both exploring one’s identity and sharing that identity with others. It also involves coping with societal responses and attitudes toward GLBT people. GLBT individuals are forced to come to terms with what it means to be different in a society that tends to assume everyone to be heterosexual and that tends to judge differences from the norm in negative ways. Thus, fear of rejection can be greater among GLBT people due to the prejudices in society against them. Some young people coming out may fear that their parents will cut off financial support or disown them, or that their friends will no longer want to be with them. These risks are scary and should be well thought through. Does the person coming out feel like they have the inner strength to manage these potential threats? How much distress is being experienced as a result of not coming out? Issues of sexual identity, sexual orientation, and sexual behavior are very individual and require deep reflection and personal choices. Whether to come out, and if so, when, where, how and to whom, are all issues to be negotiated. It’s important to attend to one’s personal situation and timetable. While everyone is unique, and not everyone goes through all of the following phases, coming out generally tends to happen in the following three phases:

Coming out to oneself. The first phase is a gradual shift from non-recognition of one’s sexual identity, to a realization of feeling different, and finally to self-recognition of oneself as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. This phase involves more than just an awareness of sexual feelings. For many people, the phase of coming out to oneself doesn’t occur until they have had contact with other GLBT people, fallen in love with someone of the same sex or explored same sex erotic behavior. During this phase, GLBT people come face to face with homophobia and heterosexism that they have themselves, such as an ideal of having an opposite sex wife/husband, or the belief that being gay is immoral. It may be helpful to seek out GLBT social, religious or political groups during this time for understanding and friendship. Also during the first phase of coming out, people incorporate their sexual identity as part of their whole overall identity. This is often a time of deep reflection and personal growth as one gains a more complete understanding of his/her sexual self.

Coming out to other GLBT people. People coming out usually first come out to friends that they feel will be accepting of their sexual identity, typically same sex friends or siblings, or peers who are known as being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Other GLBT people are a potential support as they have all experienced at least some of the steps in the process of coming out. Sharing experiences can decrease feelings of isolation and shame and help to build a community of support.

Coming out to heterosexuals. In general, coming out to others requires strength in one’s identity, for it is at this step that GLBT people are most likely to encounter negative consequences. While some people may be happy for the GLBT person who is coming out; some may be initially shocked or upset but later become accepting, while others may never accept the person as being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Coming out to others is likely to be a more positive experience when GLBT persons are more secure with their sexuality and less reliant on others for their positive selfconcept. While coming out may be one of the most difficult tasks confronted, it can also be one of the most rewarding.
“Going public” or coming out to everyone, can give a GLBT person a sense of taking control over his/her life and a great sense of self-respect and pride in oneself, and all the aspects of oneself, including sexual identity. For many GLBT people, it means an end to feeling like they are being false or hypocritical with others, or like they are two different people depending on the company they keep. It marks an end to secrecy and isolation of parts of oneself from others. There is often a sense of relief and reduction of tension when one stops trying to deny or hide such an important part of his/her life. Also, when one comes out to others, he/she may be surprised by the number of people who are a part of the GLBT community and the network of support it provides. Coming out can lead to greater freedom of self-expression, positive sense of self and more healthy and honest relationships.

Overall, issues of sexual identity, sexual orientation, and sexual behavior are very individual and require deep reflection and personal choice. This is an on-going process, not a onetime event. So take time to discover who you are and what feels right for you.