

Coming Out

By Heather Wilder, M.S., and Robyn Coombs, Psy.D.

First, what is coming out? Coming out refers to a process of telling important others that you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT). People who have not decided whether they are GLBT are referred to as questioning (Q). Coming out is a lifelong process, not a one-time event. When an individual gets a new job, sees a new doctor, moves to a new neighborhood, etc., they must decide whether they will come out all over again.

Deciding that you are GLBT is a process that takes some people a great deal of their life. Others come to recognize this in themselves much earlier, sometimes in childhood. Due to social, religious and political stereotypes and discrimination of GLBT individuals, some find it hard to accept their own GLBT identity. Most, if not all, GLBT individuals carry some remnant of any childhood messages they received from their parents, friends, church, society, etc. For many, these childhood messages reveal negative assumptions and stereotypes which may influence how a GLBT individual feels about his or her self. It should be stated that being GLBT is not a choice. The choice is only whether to live openly, or secretly as a GLBT individual.

Even if you do decide to come out know that you do not have to be out in every circumstance. The way you chose to live is up to you and only you know how the risks and benefits stack up in your particular situation.

You should realize that you might experience positive and negative outcomes from this decision. Most out GLBT individuals feel that coming out was positive overall because they no longer have to live a double or secretive life. Some feel that being out is a way to work toward eliminating the negative stereotypes that are held about GLBTQ individuals. Those same stereotypes and assumptions may have you questioning whether or not to come out.

What will I gain by Coming Out?

- I get to live openly and honestly.
- I can have closer friendships and relationships.
- My self esteem might increase because I will know that I am loved for who I truly am.
- I can go places and do things with the GLBTQ community without fear of being found out.
- I can learn who I truly am when I am free to be myself.
- I can provide a role model for others who may wish to live in the open.

What are the risks of Coming Out?

- The reactions of other people may be negative and even hurtful.
- People you thought were close to you may feel betrayed, shocked, confused, etc.
- Relationships with those you know may change forever.
- You may experience discrimination or harassment.
- Those under 18 may be kicked out of their homes.
- Those receiving support from their parents for things such as college expenses might be cut off financially.

There are a lot of things to consider before deciding to come out to friends, family or coworkers. Below you will find some issues to consider before making your decision to come out.

Are you ready?

Have you thought about what you will say? Since you will likely be nervous, you will want to plan what you will tell the other person. Not ready to identify yourself as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender? Maybe you want to tell this person that you have found yourself attracted to someone of your same sex, or that you are

not comfortable with the expectations that society has for someone of your gender? Try writing it down, if that helps, so you can refine it and practice it.

Not sure how the person will respond to you?

Try talking about GLBT news or movies. You may be able to get a sense of their reaction by using this tactic. Be careful though, you stand to get your feelings hurt should they respond negatively. This person may think highly of you which, given time, could cause them to re-evaluate their previous notions about GLBTQ individuals. If their reaction is positive, you may also get a positive reaction from them about your disclosure. However, you may find their expectations are different for you, so this is not foolproof.

Be ready with answers for questions that you anticipate. Know that any issues you had to face during your own discovery of your GLBT identity will likely be raised by those close to you. There are many places where you can get information about myths and frequently asked questions. Those resources will be listed at the conclusion of this handout.

Is this the right time?

Be sure to choose a time that sets you up for a positive response. For instance, do not come out to someone who is having a rough time (such as having just lost their job). The person's stress may cause them to respond to you negatively even if they would have reacted differently at another time.

If you get a negative response

Be patient. The person you tell may not be positive when they first hear. However, you can make a point of telling them that you are willing to talk about this with them. Try to maintain contact and do not withdraw from them out of discomfort (assuming you are not in physical danger). Give them the time they need to process your news and come to terms with their own feelings.

Choose the person who is most likely to support you

It is a good idea to first come out to a person who you anticipate will be supportive. If you get their support and kindness, they can serve as a confidant while you navigate the process of telling those who may not respond in such a positive manner. Be careful, people can surprise you. They may not be sure how to react and you may feel rejected through no negativity was intended. **REMEMBER: Their first reaction may not reflect their long-term reaction!**

Get support

There are many people and organizations that can support you. Other GLBT people can certainly be a good source of information for risks and benefits of Coming Out. Counseling centers, community mental health centers, equal rights organizations, GLBTQ campus organizations or gay-straight alliances are among those places that can provide an individual with resources and emotional support.

Things you should know:

- In most states, you can be fired from your job because of your being GLBT.
- GLBT status is not covered in many non-discrimination policies and is not protected by federal hate crime laws.

Resources:

Human Rights Campaign—www.hrc.org
Fights for GLBTQ equality. They have resources for GLBTQ individuals and their families.

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)—www.pflag.org
Resources and support groups for families and friends of GLBT individuals.

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)—www.glsen.org
Information about GLBTQ individuals and those close to them.

National Gay and Lesbian Youth Hotline
888-347-TEEN (8336)

Gay and Lesbian National Hotline
888-843-GLHN (4564) | 800-246-7743

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

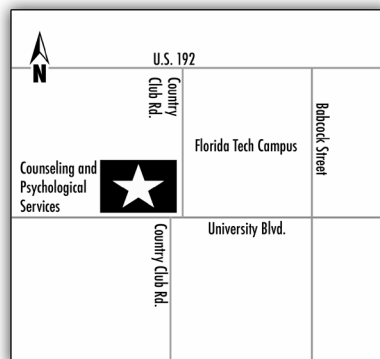
CAPS is a counseling facility operated by Florida Institute of Technology's School of Psychology. Its goals are to promote the best possible academic, vocational and emotional health. Our services are available to students and their immediate families. Counseling services are available on campus at CAPS (674-8050), off campus at the Women's Center (727-2200) or through your private health care provider.

Center Hours

Monday–Thursday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. • Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Location

Intersection of Country Club Road and University Boulevard, west of Babcock Street



For additional counseling and academic success resources and helpful articles, visit www.fit.edu/caps or call 674-8050.

Coming Out



Florida Institute of Technology
Counseling and Psychological Services