



SELF-HELP NOTES & BOOKS

UI COUNSELING & TESTING CENTER



COMING OUT

For gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals (GLB), coming out is a process of understanding and exploring one's sexual orientation and sharing that identity with others. Forming an identity of oneself as gay, lesbian or bisexual is part of the process of coming out. Our society operates under the assumption that everyone is and "should" be heterosexual-this is called "heterosexism." The message is communicated that heterosexuality is the right (or at least preferred) way to be. Thus the process of developing a gay/lesbian/bisexual identity can be difficult, both personally and interpersonally. It is a very individual process and occurs in different ways and at different ages for different people.

Development of Sexual Orientation

No one knows for sure how our sexual orientation is formed. Many theories have been proposed ranging from genetic explanations to family dynamics. Current evidence suggests that sexual orientation develops from a complex interplay of many factors including heredity (or genetics) and hormone levels during development.

Many gay/lesbian/bisexual people have felt different from a young age, some as young as three or four when we first establish a sense of what it means to be a boy or a girl. The difference felt frequently comes from the fact that they had play interests that were different from same-sex children. Boys may find they were less interested in sports and girls may find they are more athletic. This is not true only for gay/lesbian/bisexual individuals, however. One study found that 72% of gay men reported feeling "somewhat or very different" from same-sex peers, whereas 39% of heterosexual men reported similar feelings.

Adolescence is a time of great physical changes and interest in sexual behavior becomes prominent. During this period of sexual exploration, many gay/lesbian/bisexual people first begin to recognize an incongruity between their own feelings and those reported by their peers. This may lead to confusion and the first steps of identifying oneself as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Coming Out to Oneself

This process of recognizing one's own sexual identity and labeling it has been termed "coming out to oneself." Some people think of sexual orientation on a continuum from exclusive same-sex attraction (gay/lesbian) to exclusive opposite-sex attraction (heterosexuality), with bisexuality somewhere in the middle. Exploring your sexual identity can mean developing a sense of where you fall on this continuum. Developing your identity is an ongoing process that can take many years. Some people describe this time as an emotional rollercoaster; sometimes feeling happy and confident and at other times feeling confused, scared and full of self-hate. Because of societal views that we grow up with in America, self-acceptance can be a particularly challenging aspect of coming out. Families, religions, and different cultural institutions frequently communicate negative messages about sexual orientations other than heterosexuality. These may be the only messages you have heard concerning sexuality so it can be difficult to accept a different orientation in yourself.

During this time, it can be helpful to become aware of the gay/lesbian/bisexual culture that exists, frequently hidden by society's homophobia. There are hundreds of books and magazines on all aspects of gay/lesbian/bisexual life. Learning that many others have been here can help lessen the sense of isolation.

Coming Out to Others

Frequently, the next step involves telling others about your feelings. After developing a sense of your identity and beginning to accept yourself, most gay/lesbian/bisexual people want to meet other people with a similar orientation and experience; they want to explore their sexuality and relationships with others, and don't want to feel that part of them is hidden.

It can be difficult to decide whom to tell. It is usually a good idea to come out first to those who are most likely to be supportive. This might be a close friend or another gay/lesbian/bisexual person. The latter can be particularly helpful because they have experienced at least some of the steps in the process of coming out. Sharing experiences can help lessen the feelings of isolation and shame. Again, it's important to do things in your own time, on your own schedule. Be patient with yourself and the ongoing process of self-identification and self-acceptance.

Coming out to heterosexuals can be particularly difficult. This is where you may be most likely to encounter reactions and consequences. You need to be prepared for a variety of reactions. For example, it will help to understand that some heterosexuals will be shocked or confused initially, and that they may need some time to get used to the idea that you are gay/lesbian/bisexual. They may reject you initially, but through time, they may become more accepting. It can help to remember that you have probably taken a long time to get used to the idea yourself.

Sometimes, telling your family can be particularly difficult. Some members of your family may be supportive while others may be rejecting. They may have had "hints", but have preferred not to have their suspicions confirmed. Educational resources can be particularly useful for family members; there are a myriad of books and organizations designed to help families go through the process of acceptance.

Coming out to others is likely to be a positive experience when you are more secure with yourself and less dependent on others for your positive self-concept. This can help give you the fortitude to deal with the variety of responses you might receive. Choose the time and place carefully and be prepared for an initially negative reaction from some people. Have someone lined up to talk with you later about what happened.

Counseling

Counseling offers a nonjudgmental, caring, and trained therapist who can provide support as you go through the process of self-exploration and coming out. Although most counselors are sensitive and supportive of gay/lesbian/bisexual orientations, it is important to select a counselor you feel comfortable with. Directly asking a counselor about his/her feelings or knowledge about gay/lesbian/bisexual issues can help you determine the "fit". Also, you can ask others for referrals.

The University of Idaho Counseling & Testing Center (CTC) offers free group and individual counseling/psychotherapy for these and related issues for full time UI students. For more information or to schedule an appointment, call the CTC (Mary E. Forney Hall, Rm. 306, 1210 Blake Ave.) at 208-885-6716. Website: www.uidaho.edu/ctc

All appointments are strictly confidential.

BOOKS: Available for browsing in the UI Counseling & Testing Center Self-Help Room

The Original Coming Out Stories: Expanded Edition. Julia Penelope and Susan J. Wolfe, Eds. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1995.

Out on Fraternity Row: Personal Accounts of Being Gay in a College Fraternity. Shane L. Windmeyer & Pamela W. Freeman, Ed. Los Angeles, CA: Alyson Books, 1998.

The Gay and Lesbian Self-Esteem Book: A Guide to Loving Ourselves. By Kimeron N. Hardin. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 1999.

Coming Out to Parents: A Two-Way Survival Guide for Lesbians and Gay Men and Their Parents. By Mary V. Borhek. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1993.

A Family and Friend's Guide to Sexual Orientation. By Bob Powers and Ala Ellis. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out. Loraine Hutchins & Lani Kaahumanu, Eds. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991.