

Diverse Cultures – Coming Out

The process of coming out or telling other people about being lesbian, gay or bisexual is an ongoing one. Everyone comes out in his or her own way and various theorists have tried to define the process. Like other life issues surrounding identity, being lesbian, gay or bisexual impacts on the sense of self and on relationships with other people.

“I just think because in my own head I wasn’t really sure...I didn’t identify myself as being gay...this sounds really silly but I just couldn’t imagine myself being a gay person.”

Messages that same sex relationships are not normal, unacceptable or at the best tolerated abound and this influences disclosure, especially to significant family members and those other interpersonal relationships.

“She (mother) never talks to anybody gay or gay things and she always laughs at gay jokes on TV; there was on film that was on...and they were really nasty to these two gay men...I felt dead uncomfortable and my mum was pissing herself, so, that definitely decided me and I decided not to tell her.”

“When I specifically said what I said to (sister) was, you know “does it bother you that I’m talking about my girlfriend?” and she kind of said “well, no, not really” in a kind of “yeah” “kind of a way.””

“I didn’t have anybody to talk to about it, so it was a very personal thing, and it’s one of the worst feelings, you know, your mum’s sitting there and you’re crying and you can’t tell her what you’re crying about, because you’re scared that she’ll never speak to you again.”

“.. certainly at school the subject of sexuality never came about. My gay uncle was always ridiculed in our family. This I think put me further back in the closet I definitely didn’t want my family to know.”

Many people will deny being same sex attracted to themselves and, on occasions, become “anti-gay” displaying homophobic behaviour some to the point of violence. Others will develop very heterosexual lifestyles, including marriages in order to be “normal” and deny their true sexuality. (This is often referred to as “passing”).

The first stage of coming out has to be to self. Some people say that knowing that they are lesbian or gay came naturally to them.

“I kind of realised I was different when I was about 12 or younger, I kind of got teased a bit for being different.”

“Everybody’s like that “oh, boyfriends this and boyfriends that” an’ I was like that, really nothing, there was just nothing that interested me at all.”

Other may struggle for longer or simply not realise, thinking that they have not met the right heterosexual partner yet.

“Y’know, and I tried always, ehm, different things to try and make myself attractive to women.”

When lesbian, gay and bisexual people finally move from self-disclosure to talking to others, reactions can vary dramatically.

“First of all I told my sister and she was okay at first, well she said she was, but afterwards, I don’t think she could cope with it very well and I got a lot of nasty remarks made then.”

“It’s ok, I mean my mum and dad, don’t like it, they sort of know I’m gay but I think they still expect me to get married and stuff when I grow up.”

“Quite traumatic, coming out to, you know just being, trying to be honest with my mum, in particular, you know, she’s quite religious, em, hit the roof.”

The above are young lesbian, gay and bisexual people’s quotes from *“Something to tell you”* a needs assessment by Greater Glasgow NHS in 2002. The following have been identified as pertinent issues for LGBT people contained in the same report:

- ◆ Young lesbian, gay and bisexual people have followed a clear process of identity formation
- ◆ Disclosure is a key part of this process
- ◆ Over 90% of young lesbian, gay and bisexual people have disclosed their sexuality to another
- ◆ Young lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to disclose their sexuality at a younger age than young gay and bisexual men
- ◆ Young lesbians and bisexual women are more likely to have disclosed their sexuality to their parents and friends
- ◆ Young lesbian, gay and bisexual people risk changes to important relationships, both family and friends by disclosing their sexuality
- ◆ Some young lesbian, gay and bisexual people face homophobic attitudes at home and within the family preventing disclosure and openness
- ◆ A very small number of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people experience verbal and physical abuse within the family
- ◆ Knowing other lesbian, gay and bisexual people and having a positive role model are important to identity formation
- ◆ Fear of being bullied at school is overwhelming a key factor for not disclosing sexuality

During the coming out process lesbian, gay and bisexual people generally seek the support and company of other same sex attracted people. For some this is a positive experience, for others less so, particularly where they are

starting from a point of low self esteem, poor communication skills and a fear of public exposure. For those who do develop a strong sense of self, the next step of the process is of being either “*privately gay*” with the sexual partners of their choice or being fully immersed in lesbian, gay or bisexual culture. Often this will mean moving away from Fife to larger cities where there is a recognised, highly visible gay scene. For example, in Edinburgh the “*gay triangle*” often involves relationships and working life existing in tandem.

Ideally the coming out process should be a systematic sense of identity development with self and then disclosure and acceptance by others. For some this is often the case although most lesbian, gay and bisexual people can identify aspects of homophobia/heterosexism in their lives from one source or another.

“I remember my sister asking; If you could choose to be gay or straight you wouldn't want to be gay would you? At that time I agreed with her but then after some time I realised what a silly questions this was! I've always been gay, I've never chosen to be gay, I am gay! How could I possibly agree with a suggestion that would mean to agree that by being gay was in some way wrong or in some way a lesser person? ”.

Another aspect of coming out that needs understanding and consideration is that it is a lifelong on-going process. For some, style of dress and use of symbols help achieve this by giving out a clear message. However, for others it may be involving constantly having to tell any number of new people they meet.

For one lesbian parent the importance of this in relation to her children was crucial.

“If I don't tell them (stranger, new teacher etc) that I am (child's) parent they assume I am an auntie or their mum's friend and it gives (child) negative messages about our relationship.”

So although most lesbian, gay and bisexual people will agree that the initial process of coming out to self and others is the most painful, the ongoing nature of disclosure can be at best tiresome and worst leave the person open to homophobia.

Changes in partnership rights, housing tenancy agreements, parenting, adoption and right of access to information is beginning to change how lesbian, gay and bisexual people view themselves and can help in the process of coming out and the lifelong commitment to oneself.