

COMING OUT

For LGBTQ+ Youth



We are what we are, or are not.
We are fluid as air and water...elastic.
We can be one way then another.
Grow into ourselves over time...
expand. We are shape shifters, dream catchers.
people who take risks...courageous.
We are you, we are me, we are us,
bound together by hope and understanding.

Trudy Howson, LGBT+ Poet Laureate.

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INTRODUCTION

The greatest myth about coming out is that you do it once. Coming out isn't just one event – it's an ongoing process that gets easier with time.

The first time may be the most intimidating – perhaps to close friends and family – but you'll find that it keeps happening over and over. As we live in a world that assumes most people are heterosexual and cisgender, any gender identity or sexuality that isn't assumed, is left to the person to inform others of. Ideally, we need to work on breaking down assumptions about others and ourselves until this isn't the case. But until that day, you'll probably find you have to come out multiple times, to multiple people, and every time will be slightly different.

The important thing is to focus, not on the reaction, but on the process itself. Coming out is not necessarily seeking approval. It is an assertion of facts. You do not need approval from others to be who you are. You deserve and are worthy of respect like everyone else regardless of your sexuality or gender identity. 'Coming out' happens on your time-scale. We all have choices and it's fine to not come out, or to not be ready to come out. Sometimes it's not a safe choice we have to make. If you're here, it's probably to look for support with that process, or to learn more about how to support someone in that process. Either way, this guide isn't going to show you the perfect way to come out. There is no perfect way, just what works for you.

“We demand respect for our humanity
and we will give respect for everyone
else so that we can all move forward.”

Billy Porter

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

TIME

Coming to terms with your own gender and sexuality takes us time. It takes others time, too. While the 'coming out' is the conversation you might be most afraid of, remember there will be many more after this point, and they may improve over time. Your confidence in asserting yourself will increase over time as well.

SUPPORT

We can benefit from our peers, people who have gone through the same experiences we have gone through. Finding LGBTQ+ community can be helpful during the coming out process. It can be helpful to know we are not alone and to not have to explain. Support looks different to everyone, so you might want to seek it out if it's something you don't have. You might want to connect with media and stories of LGBTQ+ people or characters to hear different perspectives on being 'out'. You could see if your school has an LGBTQ+ group, or look at the BLAH Youth groups we run.

SPACE

It can be helpful to ask yourself:

What space are you coming out in?

A digital one?

Is it in person or at a distance?

Space is important, because we need time and space to process news. You might want to leave some space between coming out and answering any questions. Don't feel obliged to share more than you feel comfortable with after coming out. Consider the space that works for you, and the amount of time/distance you want between coming out and talking about it. Maybe long-distance helps with the time to process, or maybe you'll find that coming out in-person helps have a real conversation about it. It's up to you.

HOW TO PREPARE

CONNECT WITH OTHERS

You are part of a long-long line of LGBTQ+ people having similar feelings as you are now. There are so many great coming out stories you can read online, on YouTube, in books & podcasts. You might have out friends or family members to ask about it. Everyone out who you admire at some point was where you are at now. Find stories that give you hope and encouragement.

NO PRESSURE

There isn't any 'right' way to come out, just what's right for you. Avoid putting extra pressure on yourself to come out at a certain time. If you don't feel ready, you can wait. There will be other opportunities. You are in charge of how you do it and when.

TEST THE WATERS

If you're not sure how someone will react to you coming out, you can ask around the subject by asking how the person feels about a celebrity who has recently come out, a new story on LGBTQ+ topics, their feelings about LGBTQ+ rights/movements, or another out family member or friend.



START SMALL

You might want to start by telling those closest to you. Identify people you feel confident will have a positive reaction. Perhaps a friend or family member who you think it might be easier to talk to. When you've done it once, you can do it again. Having supportive allies will help build your confidence when faced with less predictable coming out scenarios.

DON'T FEEL TIED TO A LABEL

Identities change, coming out as one thing does not mean you are then tied to having one identity forever. As we go through life we might find our pronouns, sexuality or gender identity shift too, and we might need to come out again later on. It's a continual process of self-discovery. Think of labels as 'sticky labels'. They can come on and off, too.

PHONE A FRIEND

Once you've come out to those who accept you as you are, you can use that support base to come out to others you might find more challenging. Chat, text/call with a friend for emotional support. Identify safe places you can go and be with a friend if you need some space.



COMING OUT: IDENTITY WORKSHEET

This small exercise can help you visualise and think more about your identity as it is today. What is fixed for you and what is flexible for you? It can sometimes help to write down how you feel.

What is fixed and what is flexible?

Gender Identity Fixed or Flexible?

What words do you use to describe your gender?

Gender Expression Fixed or Flexible?

How do you present to others? What clothes do you prefer to wear?

Sexual Attraction Fixed or Flexible?

What type of person do you find yourself sexually attracted to? Describe their attributes

Emotional Attraction Fixed or Flexible?

Who do you feel drawn to or closest to emotionally?

Socialising Fixed or Flexible?

What gender do you prefer to socialise with? What gender identities do your close friends have?

Lifestyle Fixed or Flexible?

What communities of people do you feel most comfortable in or seek out?

SECOND CHANCES

Think about the amount of time it took you to work out how you felt about your gender identity or sexuality. Did you have any conflicting feelings about it?

You might find that your feelings towards yourself change with time in terms of levels of confidence and comfort. It's hard to have a sexuality or gender identity that stands outside of societal expectations, so what we appreciate are **supportive allies who stand up for our rights and treat us with respect.**

If you are met with a bad reaction, know that it is not your fault, and you deserve kindness and respect. **Take time to look after yourself** and put distance between the person who had the bad reaction and yourself.

A bad conversation doesn't mean it will remain that way forever.

Remember that those that you do come out to, haven't had the time you have to come to terms with all those conflicting feelings you might have gone through, too.

If you can, take some time to remember that people displaying negative reactions have not had all the time you have to come to terms with this, and remind yourself that with more education on gender and sexuality and in time, they might come to the same place of acceptance. Maybe they are being unkind, but maybe you were not kind to yourself in the past, either. There might be a future where you can forgive them, as you forgave yourself for not fully accepting yourself sooner, but right now, it's most important to look after yourself.

Coming out is a long process and not just one conversation – you can keep having the conversation in different ways, you can give people second chances to say the right things, whether next week, month, or year. **But you don't owe anyone this.** You have a right to dictate your boundaries, and if these connections prove too challenging, you need to look after your own mental health and surround yourself with those who do show you kindness and respect.

Sometimes it doesn't go to plan. We don't get welcomed with open arms and love as we should be. We might be met with fear or confusion or rejection. Your safety and your wellbeing should be the most important thing here. If you think it's possible that the person you are coming out to will react badly, you might want to:

- Think about ways you can come out with distance between you for processing so you don't receive an immediate emotional response.
- Call, text or chat with a friend / loved one for support.
- Identify safe places you can go if you need to leave to get some space.
- Plan your coming out in advance by talking it through with a trained counsellor.
- Find other LGBTQ+ people to connect with who know what you're going through.
- Reach out to a service so you have additional support.



PRIDE AND SHAME

It's not often we talk about feeling shame when it comes to identity. We might feel a pressure to feel pride. So, we don't talk about it. But it is completely normal.

LGBTQ+ communities have long been stigmatised: gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender identities have all been classified as mental illnesses at some point. We know there isn't anything wrong with being LGBTQ+. But what we logically know, and what we emotionally feel because of external messages we receive, are two very different human responses. We might know that, for example, a friend has a wider circle of friends than we do, and we are happy that they are fulfilled in this regard. However, this might not develop into a happy emotion, such as that of being supportive of our friend and their popularity, but one of jealousy, focusing inwards towards our own lives – "Why don't I have a wide circle of friends?" rather than being happy for them. It's not a 'rational' response, but it's the one you feel. Just as we might logically know that our identity isn't shameful, maybe we still feel guilt for keeping it a secret, or shame about others' reactions to us, or even, feel shame for feeling ashamed, when we see others be so out and proud and unapologetic.

Coming out is something you shouldn't feel any external pressure to do. Some people don't come out until later in life, some face factors that mean it is currently impossible to come out, which they are waiting to change first. Most of us find the thing that holds us back a lot is fear – fear of rejection, of the consequences, of loss, of gain. We don't know what our lives look like after that point. You can be out to just yourself and your identity does not become less valid: you are worthy of respect and love.

Shame around our identity happens, but there isn't a 'right way' to be LGBTQ+. It's okay to feel exhausted, you are not alone. It is tiring to keep having to hide parts of yourself, just as it is tiring to have to constantly assert your identity. Both have challenges.

But there are also lots of benefits to being LGBTQ+. We have a long history of inspirational, resilient, empowering community members championing rights, and ways to connect and find out more about our identities are always changing.

CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF

The most important thing is you are not alone, and these feelings can help you figure out where you want to get to in terms of your own journey.

If you're really struggling it might be a good step to talk to others or seek some support from a councillor. Our project can help you access low-cost counselling options, and we can also offer 1:1's in a safe and non-judgemental space to help you through difficult times. Details on page 15.

How do you want to feel about your sexuality/gender?

Do you have a good support system? Is there a way you can seek to improve this if not?

What parts of yourself do you feel most proud of?



What do you think will be better for you if you come out?

Is there anything you would change about how you present if you were not worried about other people's opinions?

Who do you admire that is out? What was their journey?

SUPPORTING OTHERS

One of the nicest things we can do as LGBTQ+ folks is to empower others through our own experiences. Once you have told your story, you might find someone else going through the same things, and you can use your story to enable them to find their voice: it's all about connection.

It might help you to write your story out. How does it end? What do you learn from the coming out experience? What would you have liked to have gone differently? Do you think you are different because of it? What would you want to tell someone going through the same thing as you?

What part of yourself do you feel you have to hide? What would you need to change in the world to be able to be yourself fully? Can you be a part of that change for someone else?



Listen to the language they use to describe their gender identity/sexuality/ ask about pronouns, respect and use the terminology they are comfortable with, not what you think is best.

Make an active stance against Homophobic, Biphobic and Transphobic bullying wherever you see it.

Even if you don't have all the answers/know a lot about LGBTQ+ issues, just saying you will be supportive and reassuring them it's normal and okay will make a big difference.

Listen to their experiences. Ask them what they need from you right now.

How can I support someone who comes out to me?

Check – do they have a good support system? Can you be a part of that support system?

Challenge gender stereotypes wherever they arise in your own and other people's language to help stop reinforcing them.

Thank them for sharing something private and for trusting them – try not to minimise the occasion by saying 'I already knew' or 'that's not news' – it's a big act of trust they are showing you! Give it the respect it deserves.

Do not pass the information on unless they allow you to share it, or unless you are concerned for their wellbeing or safety.

IN SCHOOL

How supported do you feel at school?

Check whether:

- Your school runs an LGBTQ+ group for students
- Your school has LGBTQ+ visible inclusion
- Your school is part of the Norfolk LGBT+ Project's Educating with Pride Network or another LGBTQ+ scheme.
- Anti-bullying is enforced and LGBTQ+ students are included
- You would feel safe being out at school
- You feel your peers and friends would have your back

Reach out to staff members/ peers who have indicated they are supportive allies or LGBTQ+ themselves.

If you're feeling really brave you might want to speak up for others and yourself if you think LGBTQ+ inclusion is missing from your school and suggest it should be included!

Sometimes it only takes one voice to make a change happen, like a ripple effect, and you can make an environment much more welcome for others who feel the same as you.

Sometimes we don't all get the opportunity to come out in our own time as we should, and others out us. If this happens in a school environment, you should tell someone: it's not acceptable. Suggest that the person who outs you undergoes some additional support in learning about LGBTQ+ issues and why this is not okay. There might not have been any bad intentions behind it, but quite often people fail to realise the importance of telling your own story. Personal information like this should only be yours to share, and others can disclose it only with your permission, or until you are comfortable for everyone to know.

It might even be a topic that is worth the whole school discussing or having an assembly/ lessons in as gender and sexuality spectrums are not really taught in schools and often people misinterpret what having an LGBTQ+ identity is, mixing up sex, gender, sexual orientation and gender presentation.

It is tiring to have to educate others on your own identity so don't feel you have to do so, you can say as much or as little as you want to – but there will always be opportunities to turn difficult experiences into a way to help others and grow in the process.



COMMUNITY

Being an LGBTQ+ young person means that it is hard to find yourself on your own terms, because often other people will expect you to be certain things based on their assumptions about what LGBTQ+ people should and shouldn't be.

We want everyone to be themselves, but we also want them to be themselves in the RIGHT ways, in the ways we recognise as valid. If this seems unfair – it is.

That's why this booklet keeps emphasising that there is no right way to come out. There is also no right way to be LGBTQ+. There are many identities within an identity, and choosing a label does not mean you have to embody everything other people associate with that label.

Your journey isn't anyone else's. We can look up to others and relate to their experiences, but they still won't be exactly the same. Sometimes in order to find our own identity we create labels for others, too. But for your own identity to be realised does not mean that you have to invalidate other people's identity. For example, some LGBTQ+ people will pride themselves on say, not being 'camp' or passing well, not 'looking trans' not being one of 'those gays'. In validating our own LGBTQ+ identity, sometimes we fall into the trap of tearing down other peoples, and we must remember that when we say these things, we continue to suggest that being camp, or feminine, or looking trans, are bad things to be, which hurts all of us.

The LGBTQ+ community is like any community – it fights a lot amongst itself. Look for those that make you feel seen, heard and respected, and question the connections you have that do not make you feel those things – investigate why that is. Your chosen group of people are your own community, which also looks different to everyone. It might be other LGBTQ+ people, friends or family. Together we can focus on what unites us and support each other.



FAMILY

Family (and families look different to all of us) can be especially scary to come out to as they are often the people, we spend most time with and care about the most.

They might also have preconceived ideas about what they want for you when you are older, or how they imagine your life to be, that they hold onto when having this discussion. Think about how to have the discussion in a safe and approachable way, where you feel most comfortable, and also where you feel able to leave and get some space should you need to.

Even though coming out is about you, it's nice to consider others when you can and you know your family best. Think about the time and spaces you think might be best for them to have this conversation with you too, as you want it to go as well as possible!

If you need support in getting ready to come out, or think your parents or guardians might benefit from speaking to other parents of LGBTQ+ children, then you can contact us for support. We might be able to help in speaking with parents/carers and keeping your lines of communication open on this topic. If you are in care and need support coming out to your carers or changing placements, we can support you in this, too.



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Norfolk LGBT+ Project

is a registered charity, providing support, information and advice to all age groups that is relevant to the health and wellbeing of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in Norfolk and Waveney since 2007.

What we do...

One-to-one support

that suits your needs

1-1



zoom

f

ig

tw

 **Norfolk LGBT+**
 INCLUSIVITY
 WORKPLACE
 AWARD

Annual award working in partnership with us to make your workplace LGBT+ Inclusive.

LGBT+



COUNSELLING

One-to-one low cost counselling sessions to LGBT+ people and for those who may be questioning and experiencing issues relating to their sexuality or gender identity.

LGBT+ drop-in groups

Meet biweekly or monthly



Creating a safe LGBT+ inclusive environment by offering a bespoke package tailored for your school.



We tailor the training to suit your organisations needs or you can attend one of our OPEN sessions. Provided via Zoom or face-to-face.



Support group for parents/carers of LGBT+ children and young people living in Norfolk and Waveney

We are here to offer a safe space for parents/carers to find support and to connect with other parents.

For more information: info@norfolklgbtproject.org.uk
01603 219299 • www.norfolklgbtproject.org.uk

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SUPPORT INFORMATION ADVICE

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