

Stages in Coming Out

Cass' Homosexual Identity Development Model

Coming out is a process that happens again and again; it is not just a one time deal and it does not follow a linear course. It occurs initially when one acknowledges to oneself (most important and difficult aspect of coming out) and to others that one is gay, lesbian or bisexual. One claims that orientation as his/her own and begins to be more or less public with it.

Coming out to themselves is one of the hardest steps in developing a positive gay/lesbian/bisexual identity for gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. It involves much soul searching and introspection and a good healthy sense of self-appreciation and acceptance. Coming out to others involves other risks and difficulties depending on who that person is coming out to , how engaged they are with them, how much power they have in the relationship, and how accepting they are.

Why come out? It is a necessary part of developing a healthy and positive identity as a gay/lesbian/bisexual individual. It is more honest and real, and ends the stress of hiding or keeping a secret and living a double life. It reduces isolation and alienation and allows for increased support from other gay/lesbian/bisexual people. It allows LesBiGay people to live a fuller life.

What are people afraid of? Rejection and loss of relationship, especially family and friends who do not understand or approve. The real possibility of harassment and abuse from others, ranging from verbal insults to physical violence against them or their possessions. Real possibility of institutionalized discrimination and prejudice. For example, losing a job, not being hired for a career, being denied housing and other equal opportunity rights.

There are stage development theories that attempt to describe the process of coming out. Cass is the most widely known and used. Her model includes six stages that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The stages are:

I	Identity Confusion	Sees self as member of mainstream group. Denial of inner feelings.	<p style="text-align: center;">Who am I?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Am I different?</p>
II	Identity Comparison	Begin to come out of the "fog."	<p style="text-align: center;">Maybe I am gay.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">I'm alone.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">What are gay people like?</p>

III	Identity Tolerance	Encounter someone or something that breaks through the denial system.	I accept the possibility that I may be gay. Where are other gay people?
IV	Identity Acceptance	Exploring subculture activities, readings, etc.	I am gay. Am I okay? I can come out to some people.
V	Identity Pride	Feel arrogance/pride in new identity and deep rage toward majority culture. May adopt/heighten stereotypical behaviors or characteristics (i.e. "I'm different and proud of it!". May isolate self from mainstream values and activities.	I am proud to be gay. I don't (and won't) pass for straight.
VI	Identity Synthesis	Acceptance and integration of new identity. May go through five stages of grief to let go of old identity and all advantages of heterosexual privilege. Internalize pride/positive feelings about identity. Typically is "out" (with friends, family, at work). More at peace with self.	I am an okay person who happens to be gay.

There are other theories and they basically follow a similar pattern: the initial stage involves some awareness that another way of being (besides being heterosexual) exists and that it is somehow attractive fits the individual. This is followed by attempts to explore that way of being, the community, and culture that it represents and attempts to explore how it fits, how one might feel when acting on one's curiosity. Then some phase of coming to terms with what seems to be one's identity and orientation including rationalizing it away and denying it until some resolution and piece of mind is reached that ends in self-acceptance and grows into self-appreciation. And finally, a synthesis of one's sexual orientation with the rest of the person.