

Coming Out in the Counselling Room

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- “i knew when i was in junior high that i liked girls--but coming from a small southern town I knew that being who I wanted to be was not a good thing ... its sometimes just easier to be what others want u to be than try and be someone u know thats not going to do anything but hurt others. but im getting stronger with my opinions and my wants so maybe one day i will be one thats proud to stand up and say.....I AM GAY AND I LOVE WOMEN” - unique I, 52, experience
project.com

- “So here it is folks, I am a 31 year old guy who is desperate to come out but is just so scared of the consequences of doing so. To make matters worse, I am very much alone at this point in my life ... I am ashamed to admit I am in a long term relationship with a girl who is expecting me to marry her and start a family. I have put this off for the past 2 years as there is something (being this issue) stopping me... It has felt like a no win situation for nearly one whole decade. I am drowning.” salvatore del franco, 31, [experience project.com](http://experienceproject.com)

- ‘am closeted gay and i cant take it anymore....its killing me, at nights i cry myself to sleep, because i don't like who i am or who am i going to be. i also needs more friends to talk about it. sometime i think these feeling are going to drive me crazy” adayinny, 22-25, experience project.com

- 2 million mixed orientation couples in the US (Straight Spouse Network)
- 3 million women in US are married to men who have had sex with men (U of Chicago)
- 20% of gay men in US are in a heterosexual relationship (Family Pride Coalition)
- 50% of gay men in US have fathered children (Family Pride Coalition)
- 40% of lesbians in US are married to a male partner (Family Pride Coalition)
- 75% of lesbians in US have children (Family Pride Coalition)

- Heterosexual, straight (male or female): person attracted to opposite sex or to describe mixed sex relationships and behaviours
- Homosexual (m/f) lesbian (female), gay (usually male): person attracted to the same sex or to describe same sex relationships and behaviours
- Bisexual (m/f): person attracted to men as well as women or to describe sex relationships and behaviours with both sexes

- Transgender: 1) person who has permanently switched their gender (pre and post op) because their identity is opposite of the one given at birth; 2) intersex person with characteristics of both genders; and 3) person who behaves in ways which others may view as appropriate only for persons of the opposite sex

- Same sexual attractions is usually associated with developmental difficulty in acknowledging these feelings to themselves or others:
- ‘Closeted’ - cannot acknowledge homoerotic feelings, attractions and fantasies. These feelings must be dissociated out of conscious awareness. A ‘split’
- ‘Homosexually self-aware’ - same sexual feelings and attractions are no longer completely dissociated. They acknowledge some aspect of their sexuality to themselves

- ‘Non-gay-identified’: same sexual feelings are acknowledged and they may have acted on their feelings or may have once identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual. But they find it difficult/impossible to naturalize their attractions, may reject them or may even seek to change their orientation (Drescher & Zucker)
- ‘Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender’: They are prepared to accept their identity and reveal it to others. They claim a normative identity and exhibit some measure of self-acceptance.

Homophobia

- Four levels of Homophobia
- 1. Fear and hatred of gays and lesbians
- 2. The fear of being perceived as gay or lesbian
- 3. The fear of one's own sexual or physical attraction for the same sex.
- 4. The fear of being gay or lesbian

- Homophobia operates on four distinct but related levels:
- 1. Personal: A personal belief that LGBT are inferior to heterosexuals because of they are psychologically, genetically or morally defective
- 2. Interpersonal: discrimination either passive or active through ‘jokes’ defamation, verbal assault, physical assault, threats and intimidation, violence, rejection, abandonment.

- 3. Institutional: government bodies, religious institutions, businesses, laws and other organisations such as youth groups, etc, which systematically discriminate on the basis of sexual identity and orientation.
- 4. Cultural: social norms and conduct such as media and arts which legitimise oppressing sexual minorities

- 96% of gay men have experienced verbal abuse because of their sexuality
- 40% of gay men have experienced physical violence because of their sexuality
- Lesbians are two times more likely to attempt suicide than straight women.
- Gay men are six times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.

- Attempts by gay and lesbian youth account for up to 30% of all completed suicides.
- Gay teens are 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.
- Gay youth are 4 times more likely to make a suicide attempt requiring medical attention. (The Trevor Project)

Internalized Homophobia

- Negative feelings we have towards ourselves because of our same sexuality. They can take the form of:
 - Aggressive Denial
 - Denial
 - Closeted with awareness
 - Partially out only to select people
 - Out but dislikes certain gays and lesbians

In the Closet and Afraid

- Common reasons LGBT stay in the closet:
- Fear of rejection by society, religion, family, friends, acquaintances
- Fear of eternal damnation - HIV as price
- Belief that this is an aberration
- Feelings only a 'phase'
- Physical needs met through anonymous sex
- Belief that they can 'fix' themselves

- Psychological impact of staying in closet:
- Increased alcohol/substance use
- Avoidance of intimacy with partner
- Avoidance of intimacy with friends and family
- Sexual aversion or sexual addiction
- Erectile dysfunction; retarded ejaculation
- Being hypersexual with the opposite sex
- Anonymous sexual encounters
- Physical complaints/somatic illnesses

- Contempt for LGBT persons
- Contempt for effeminate gay men or masculine gay women
- Depression
- Anger at self
- Anger at spouse
- Anger at children
- Eating disorders
- Emotional withdrawal from family
- Physical withdrawal from family

Coming Out

- The trauma of living with a secret becomes overwhelming due to a history of:
- Inability to be authentic and integrated
- Learned to compartmentalise their life
- Difficulty in forming real attachments
- Impaired self esteem
- Living in a state of perpetual fear

- The reasons to come out:
- No longer willing to lie
- The stress of living a double life becomes unmanageable
- Being confronted by spouse about lack of sexual/emotional intimacy
- No longer willing to pretend to be straight
- Exposure in media and culture that normalizes LGBT
- Closet as a 'Prison'

Emotional Responses

- Anger
- Fear
- Rage
- Resentment
- Betrayal
- Depression
- Shame
- Guilt

Straight Partners

- Feel sexually rejected
- Sexual self esteem damaged
- ‘Did I do something to cause this?’
- Low self-image and high self-doubt
- Worried about children
- Huge sense of betrayal - Living a lie
- Fear that family will be torn apart
- Questions fidelity
- Needing to cope with shame

- When the gay, lesbian, or bisexual partner comes out:
- 1/3 of couples break up immediately
- 1/3 stay together for one to two years sorting things out leading to a divorce
- 1/3 try to make their marriage work
- Of the latter, half of them eventually divorce and the rest stay together three or more years (Straight Spouse Network)

- When couples were 'best friends' prior to and during their marriage, they have a better chance of negotiating a coming out.
- Couples need to understand that it takes two to make a relationship - the straight partner can't fix this
- Sexual health needs to be addressed. If disclosure includes infidelity, sexual health MOT needs to be carried out
- The loss cycle can help in understanding the grief
- Focus on the good times of the relationship

- Coming out in the counseling room is not only about disclosing a secret
- The torment of living a lie often results in self-loathing
- The LGBT partner usually feels tremendous guilt for what they have done
- They often say they don't want to hurt their straight partner anymore
- They feel deep remorse
- Their intentions were usually with the hope that they can bury their desires

- The sense of betrayal needs to be validated but not reinforced - there is a seduction to treat coming out as an 'affair'
- Straight partners need to be supported during their loss and helped to recover from their grief
- Straight partners often need help in negotiating their future especially regarding children and family - this is a 'coming out' for them as well and shame will often be in the foreground
- Straight partners need to build their self esteem and self worth sexually and socially

- LGBT partners need to be supported in the coming out process - the journey from a shame based space to a life affirming one
- LGBT partners need to be supported in the process from moving from a psychologically dissociative sense of self to an integrated sense of self
- Years of 'living in the closet' often results in an impaired appropriate vulnerability - therapy can help model safe relationships
- Coming out in the counseling room is helping the LGBT person claim a normative identity

- The counsellor's role for a straight partner is helping them come to terms with their loss, recover their sense of worth, and negotiate their future
- The counsellor's role for the LGBT partner is helping them recover from the trauma of chronic fear and self loathing, the potential loss of a relationship, recovering their self esteem, negotiating their future, reducing their shame
- Above all: The counsellor must recognize and respect individual differences and multiple possibilities

-The closeted partner has a crisis experience in which everything that they have sought to repress, deny, beat down, hold at bay, forget about, overcome, pray away, and sublimate, comes rushing to the surface...like a sleeping volcano that suddenly comes to life - the closeted partner, while married to a dear friend, is thrust speedily back to their natural inclination/orientation simply because someone asks to kiss them.

- “The damn world needs to realize how **STUPID** it is being hostile and discriminatory against homosexual people. I don’t understand it! Still going on in this day and age. Why does it matter who I am attracted to, or what I’m doing in the bedroom? How does that affect you at all? Why even hate in the first place!?”
Speaknoevil, 22, experience project.com