

Coming Out and Identities

Introduction

First of all

One of the main differences between homophobia and other forms of discrimination, such as sexism and racism, is that homosexual feelings are not readily recognizable from the outside, unless a person decides to openly show them. Sociologists call this phenomenon “invisible stigma”, as opposed to the “visible stigma”, i.e. a person’s sex or ethnic origin. To avoid possible hostile reactions, LGBT persons often have to decide whether or not showing their sexual orientation. “*Coming out*” means acknowledging one’s sexual orientation to oneself and to others.

Coming out is considered one of the key steps of the of the wider identity development process through which LGBT persons learn how to deal with the social stigma attached to their sexual orientation. Indeed, that begins when the moment in which individuals clearly identify themselves as homosexuals. Every coming out story is unique and it is a gradual, on-going process. There are people who came out at work, but not to their family, others came out only to their closest friends, others are openly homosexual. Of course, it a crucial process that involves not only the LGBT person but also the people around them, and it is an opportunity for tremendous emotional growth for all parties involved.



Therefore, coming out is a process that starts with individuals becoming aware of their own self and of their feelings, continues through the identification and fulfilment of their needs, and ends with the confrontation/encounter with the other and with the environment.

According to Coleman's model, there is a stage called pre-coming out: children over three years of age have already formed their gender identity and learned the ethical values of their family and social group. The majority of children internalise at a very early stage a negative judgement of homosexuality, bisexuality and transexuality. Consequently, those children who discover their homosexual, bisexual or transexual inclinations start feeling alone, different and confused. The feelings that characterise this kind of experience are perceived as unpleasant and are rejected through real psychological defences: every time people deny their feelings or avoid expressing them, they are wounding themselves. Basically, individuals in the pre-coming out stage are often not even aware of their homosexual feelings, they are unable to pinpoint what is wrong or, if they are aware of these feelings, they are accompanied by low self-esteem, shame, sense of unworthiness or experience them as belonging to a separate part of their personality.

Instead, when they come out, individuals acknowledge their homosexual, bisexual or transexual feelings. They associate themselves with their emotions, needs and fantasies to themselves, and accept them although they do not clearly understand their meaning and do not fully identify with the stereotypes or social images of homosexuality, bisexuality and transexuality. Then, over time, the need arises to tell such experiences others who they consider as significant people in their lives. This is a very delicate moment, where they can experience the joy of being accepted, as well as the pain of being rejected.

We can therefore imagine that, for LGBT persons, coming out is not a final decision made at a given stage; it is, rather, a continuous decision-making process, to be developed step by step, starting when a person – often teenagers – acknowledges his/her homosexual (and/or bisexual or transexual) feelings. From that moment on, they will have to decide whether or not to come out every time they meet a person “who does not know”.

Basic information

Puberty is a crucial moment in the development of any human being. As heterosexual teens start to experience their sexuality and their first romantic feelings for the opposite sex, LGBT teens feel left out of this fascinating experience. The social pressure surrounding gender roles is extremely strong and the people whose sexual identity does not fit into the traditional model have the impression that they don't have a place in the world and can feel lonely, confused, "abnormal". This can sometimes even lead to suicide.

During puberty, as this situation makes them feel helpless, LGBT persons feel forced to choose between a double life (heterosexual in public and LGBT in private) and a public coming out.

The coming out process of is influenced by a number of variables: gender, ethnic group, environment (urban vs. rural), values and attitudes of society, individual characteristics and physical ability. Also the way in which boys and girls are socialised into traditional gender roles has an influence on their coming out.

Many counsellors note that girls often discover their homosexual orientation after feeling a 'sentimental' or 'romantic' attraction for other girls, while boys more often realise it after discovering they are sexually attracted to other boys or after having sex with them.

There are no role models for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals. This problem can be even more pronounced for migrants. There are virtually no openly homosexual, bisexual or transexual public figures who belong to ethnic minorities for young people to identify with. The lack of role models leads many LGBT persons to feel isolated and to suffer from low self-esteem.

Being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transexual and, at the same time, a member of an ethnic minority means having a multiple minority social status.

A black lesbian, for instance, will have to fight against racism, sexism and heterosexism.

However, there is a difference between a minority status linked to sexual orientation and a minority status linked to ethnic origin. Young LGBTs are born and grow up in families that hadn't foreseen their sexual orientation and that often react to it by showing negative feelings (e.g. fear, disgust, hatred, sense of guilt). Parents of LGBT children frequently mourn the loss of the heterosexual image of their child as they were almost grieving the death of a child. Conversely, a boy or a girl who belongs to a ethnic minority grows up in a family that is likely to be very proud of its cultural background and therefore supports and strengthens the identity of the child.

What does this mean to me?

Coming out must be a personal choice and is a continuous process. Therefore, it is important to treat the decisions of the boys and girls with respect. In order to provide adequate support, it would be preferable to create a secure and empathic atmosphere in which teens can talk freely about their needs. They should be supported and helped in managing their feelings and building their identities.

It is important that you to respect the emotions of the teens and accept them for what they are.

Teachers and psycho/social/ healthcare professionals should accept the self-definitions of the teen without questioning them. Remember that there are people who have sex with persons of their own gender but do not define themselves as homosexual or bisexual. It is therefore important to understand what the teens mean when they describe themselves.

Education

(Teachers)

Bear in mind

- What do you think about students who come out to their classmates? Do you think that this is important for LGBT teens? Do you fear this situation? Would you react in a positive way?
- Teenager should not be forced to come out to their classmates. It must be their own decision because it will profoundly affect their life. Consider the difficulties people from different cultural backgrounds have to face during the coming out process.
- How do you think your students would react to the coming out of a classmate? What would the atmosphere in the classroom be like? Would a LGBT student dare to publicly show his/her homosexuality, bisexuality, transexuality?
- If you think that coming out is in principle no longer a problem in your school, could you identify the 5-10% gay, lesbian, bisexual and transexual students of your school?
- Do you know why your students might react negatively towards this issue? Remember that they are engaged in building their own identity and they probably feel that it is disturbing to confront someone who does not follow the rules of the majority: this implicitly questions the direction of their own development.

Education - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the FAQs for the psycho/social/healthcare professionals.

How do teenagers understand they are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transexual?

Most gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals realise it just the way heterosexual teenagers realise that their romantic feelings and sexual desire are directed towards the opposite sex. This process starts earlier than one might think, around the onset of puberty. Since their sexual orientation is socially stigmatised, it could take longer to acknowledge homosexual, bisexual or transexual feelings, especially if they are repressed.

How does the environment react when a person comes out?

There is no straightforward answer to this, since individual situations may vary greatly. If young LGBTs think that homosexuality, bisexuality and transexuality is something to be ashamed of, they have most likely interiorised the homophobia and transphobia that is – consciously or unconsciously – present in their environment or families. In this case, their coming out will probably be met with hostility. Conversely, if someone is open and feels at ease in his/her

Education - Tools

Me / Not Me-Game

Aim: to experience how it feels to belong to a minority group.

Method: prepare a list of questions asking “who“ behaves in a certain way (e.g. Who has smoked at least once in his/her life? Who has ever taken the bus without paying? Who has ever kissed a girl or a woman?

Who has ever kissed a boy or a man? Who would go to a lesbian café? Who would go to a gay nightclub? And other questions concerning love, relationships and sexuality. The participants walk around the room while the questions are asked. There are two opposite zones in the room: one for the “Me“ answers and the other for the “Not me” answers. Those are the only two possible answers. The participants are asked before the exercise to answer by choosing one of the two zones in the room, then they are asked to remain silent and abstain from making comments during the exercise. The main goal of the exercise is to observe the situation determined by the answers and how people split up in the two zones.

After each question, the participants have to split into two groups: those who answer “Me“ go to one side of the room and those who answer “Not me“ go to the opposite side. Participants have to look at the people in the room, noting who is on their side and who is on the other, and pay attention to their own feelings. Then everybody starts walking around the room until the next question is asked.

Important note: the students are allowed to lie, i.e. nobody should be forced to answer the questions by telling the truth. Which is why the last question should be: “Who has lied at least once during this game?” The questions should be followed by a group discussion on the emotions and feelings of the participants, including possible feelings of surprise (if any).

Please note: in this game, students can experience the situation of those gay, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals who have to hide an important part of their life. It is important for the teacher to play along and answer the questions by moving from one side of the classroom to the other. The teacher should finish the session by answering to the last question “Who did not tell the truth at least once during this game?” by saying “Me”, otherwise most students will not dare to say that they lied.

condition, they presumably grew up in a more welcoming environment that allowed them to interiorise a positive image of themselves and of others. Thus, their environment will probably respond in a positive way.

Absurdly, those who need more help find less support in their closest circle.

Why is someone gay, lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual or transexual?

To date, there is no scientific answer to this question. The most commonly accepted explanation is that sexual orientation is the product of complex interactions between biological, psychological, social and cultural factors.

How do I deal with a teenager who comes out in class?

Teenagers rarely come out in class. If it does happen, it would be best to talk about it in front of the class as frankly as possible. The boy/girl should be consulted in advance and asked if this is alright with him/her.

When discussing the subject in class, do not refer directly to the student who has come out, but speak in more general terms. Increasing people’s knowledge about gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals is crucial for preventing social exclusion.

Inside the family

Aim: to explore the crises that arise when people come out to their families or relatives.

Method: the students are asked to talk about the main problems they have with their parents (difficulties, disagreements, etc.), the way in which they and their parents manage the disagreements and the emotional reactions involved when their (teens' and parents') expectations are different. The students discuss the possible reactions of families that discover that their son or daughter is homosexual, bisexual or transexual. To foster the discussion, you could show the students the music video of the song "Smalltown boy" (Bronski beat, 1983). Then, a girl is asked to role play the part of a student who finds out that her sister is a lesbian during the break and she is unsure about telling her parents. Finally, the students analyze and discuss what happened in the role play.

Please note: if the discussion becomes too chaotic, you can divide the class into small groups, each group will designate a spokesperson.

During the discussion, make sure that the students don't focus their attention of value judgment, on what is right and what is wrong, and encourage them to express their emotions with questions like: "what do you feel when you say that?"

Let's Imagine That ...

Aim: to understand why the coming out process can be very difficult for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals.

Method: divide the students into small same-gender groups. In these groups, they have to imagine what would change in their life if they were gay, lesbian, bisexuals or transexual. Give the groups time to think about it. How would they behave? How would their friends react? Do they picture positive or negative reactions? Why?

Please note: this method can be embarrassing for LGBT students, especially if they have not come out, therefore it requires caution. If someone has difficulty imagining being gay, tell them to imagine that everyone was homosexual and only a few people were heterosexual.

What would that be like for those few people?

Alternative suggestion: have the students read an extract of an autobiography by a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transexual author (see *Appendix 4 of the Handbook*).

Counselling

(Psycho/social/healthcare professionals)

Bear in mind

- How do you view the effects of discrimination on LGBT teenagers? What does having homoerotic desires mean in teen culture?
- What do you think about sexual orientation? Is 'orientation' for you the same as 'preference', 'identity', 'classification' or 'behaviour', or do you normally differentiate between these aspects?
- Observe yourself the next time you will talk about homosexuality, bisexuality and transexuality. Do you tend to avoid using the term homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transsexual? How often do you mix up these words when you use them and how often do you pay closer attention in order to use them properly?
- How would you deal, for instance, with a boy or a girl who have sex with same-sex partners but who declare themselves as heterosexual? Would you consider them homosexuals in denial or just teenagers who are in search of their own identity?
- Counsellors are aware of the challenges facing teenagers in Western culture, but what about the challenges facing a LGBT teenager belonging to an ethnic minority?
- What do you think about the coming out process? Do you consider it to be important? How do you deal with a LGBT teenager who is afraid of coming out?

A STORY...



Why did he even mention the existence of the sports group to Jan? And he really come, can you believe it?

Jan makes him feel confused, it would be better if he had never come to Amsterdam. At first Mark was quite happy to finally have another enthusiastic and talented swimmer in his class, and not to be the only one.

Two young guys are hanging out in the yard outside his house, casually walking around. They were obviously waiting for him. For days now, they have been following him around, yelling stupid comments. I'll just pretend they're not really here, he thinks. He crosses the street, seemingly indifferent to their taunts, and heads to his door. Peter is standing in his way, with an evil grin on his face. Mark holds his breath, doesn't see Peter and suddenly bumps into him.

"Hey, you fucking faggot, don't think I'll let one of your kind grope me like that!" sneers Peter, taking one step towards Mark.

"Shut up, damn it!" screams Mark. Peter and Freck back off, bewildered. It takes less than two seconds for Mark to turn the key and open the door. Furious, he slams it shut after him.

"Mark, what's wrong? Your father is trying to rest. He just finished his shift!"

Mark doesn't even bother to look at his mother.

Could the whole world please leave me alone?

"Mark, I am talking to you." His mother pulls his sleeve.

"You know what? Living in this shitty place is so great!" Mark snaps back at her through clenched teeth. He breaks himself loose quickly and runs to his room.

I must think about something else. Do my math homework or perhaps call Mareike. Irene still thinks that she fancies me. Alright, then...

He stares at the telephone, dials Mareike's number but when he hears her voice he immediately hangs up. He runs back to the door and locks it.

He pictures Jan smiling at him and hugging him at the end of the game. A kiss on the right, a kiss on the left, they all say goodbye like that. The only thing is that Mark's heart starts beating like crazy, his whole body becomes electrified when he feels Jan's body so close to his own. I must have gone completely mad, thinks Mark, desperate. A guy shouldn't be able to turn me on like that. It's Mareike's voice, not his hug that should make me feel this way. I can't go to school any more. I must avoid Jan.

"Mark, could I please talk to you after class?" Great, and now this! His mother receiving a letter from the school yesterday – telling her that due to frequent absences Mark might not be promoted at the end of the year – was already bad enough. And now the teacher wants to talk to him.

Mark can already imagine what it will be.

He should not have yelled at Jan, let alone push him away so roughly. The fact that Jan had hugged him so enthusiastically after they won could not excuse his reaction. But the worst thing was the way in which Jan had looked at him, turning around and walking away without a single word. Mark's stomach turns over every time he thinks about it. During class, Mark keeps staring at Jan's empty chair and cannot think clearly. Jan's face has been haunting his dreams for weeks, turning him on, and his heart starts to beat faster when he sees Jan, even from a distance.

"We've got to talk, right away," says the teacher to Mark. "Since the start of the school year, you have become another person. You skip school, you barely let anyone at school talk to you, and now this. I would have thought you'd be pleased to have a fellow swimmer in the class, and that you and Jan would become best friends."

"He might be a super-swimmer, but that's not enough", snaps Mark. "I just don't want him to touch me like that!"

"Mark, you must apologise to Jan!" The teacher looks at Jan, pensive.



“Having hugged you doesn’t mean Jan is gay. And even if he was, I won’t tolerate homophobia, or any other type of discrimination.”

Homophobia, homophobia, the word keeps pounding in Mark’s head, and suddenly he begins to cry.

“Come on now, what’s wrong with you?” The voice of Mr. van der Kolk sounds bewildered. He holds Mark by the shoulders, cautiously. “You have always been such a brilliant student. And being homophobic simply isn’t like you. Jan has enough problems as it is, what with being new in this school and everything. And he likes you, I noticed it from the very first day. Mark, I expect an explanation for your behaviour in front of the whole class. You will take responsibility, is that clear?”

“Jan really likes you.” The teacher’s voice goes on and on in Mark’s head.

“Mark?”

“I can’t do it.” Mark’s voice trembles.

“Then you will have to speak to our school psychologist. This thing with Jan, your poor attendance, all that must be sorted out. Quickly.”

The school psychologist looks friendly. “Among other things, I insulted and pushed back a schoolmate, that’s why I am here.”

Mr. de Vries nods almost imperceptibly. “What happened?”, he asks as Mark stops speaking.

“Why does he have to touch me when I win?” cries Mark. “If he had only kept his hands to himself.” He stops, despaired.

“Is it because he hugged you that you lashed out at him?”

Mark nods silently.

“Perhaps it was important for Jan to show you how proud he was of your performance, because he likes you. There’s nothing abnormal about that, Mark, don’t you think?”

“No”, yells Mark, and runs to the door. “It’s absolutely not normal, it’s perverse.”

Nobody knows what he’s going through. Peter and Freek wouldn’t hesitate to beat him up, if he ever... It’s best not to think about it. He must go through ten sessions with the school psychologist – that was the agreement with Mr. van der Kolk.

“Nice to see you again”, greets him Mr. de Vries.

Mark nods silently. How could he make it clear to the psychologist that at night he dreams of Jan, that he even has erections because of him, and that at the same time he would most of all like to get rid of him?

“Here you can say anything you want, even what seems strange to you”, says Mr. de Vries quietly, suddenly breaking through Mark’s confusion.

“I don’t even understand myself. I didn’t mean to hurt Jan, but ...”. Desperately, Mark wipes off his tears with his pullover sleeve.

“But he confuses you quite a lot?” The school psychologist’s question sounds almost like a statement.

Mark looks at him quickly. How did he understand that? “I think about him all the time”, slips out of him so suddenly that he does not have the time to think before speaking.

“You like him so much and this scares you, is that right?”

“Yes”, whispers Mark in tears. At last he has told someone about it. He gives a quick glance to the psychologist. He still looks friendly.

“You are not the only guy attracted to another guy, Mark.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I know how difficult it is to speak about attraction between guys. But you are not alone. There is a gay and lesbian group for young people, here in Amsterdam. I am quite sure that they would be happy to meet you. Maybe you’d like to take their brochure “Boys who love boys”. You just have to call them. Think about it Mark, will you? If you need me give me a call, okay?”

Mark doesn’t look at the psychologist. But he nods.



Counselling - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the FAQs for the education sector.

And if a teen asks me “Am I gay?”, how can I know that?

Gays and lesbians are as much a mixed group as heterosexuals and homosexuality cannot be identified from physical or personality features. Counsellors can ask teens what they feel, what they are thinking, supporting them without judgement or ready-made answers.

It could also be useful to explore their personal representations of homosexuality.

Do people choose to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transexual?

No. Being homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual or transexual is not a choice; LGBT individuals can only decide whether they will come out to others or not.

Are parents to blame for their children’s homosexuality, bisexuality or transexuality?

Absolutely not. In fact, gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals are usually born to heterosexual parents and the children of gay, lesbian, bisexual or transexual parents are often heterosexual. Parents have no influence on a child’s sexual orientation but they can encourage their children’s self-esteem and independent sexuality.

How should I deal with a teen who has sex with same-sex partner but defines him/herself as heterosexual?

Sexual orientation is made up of many components: erotic attraction, sexual behaviour, sexual fantasies, falling in love, self-image and social preferences. These dimensions do not always coincide; there are indeed a few people who have sex with same-sex partners but do not define themselves as homosexual. The counsellor must accept the teens’ own self-definition without questioning it, while at the same time trying to understand the underlying representations.

In any case, self-definition as a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transexual may be irrelevant in some cultures.



Counselling -Tools

A Gay Man/ a Lesbian Woman/ a Bisexual Person/ a Transsexual Person Is...

Issue: internalised homophobia and transphobia prevents gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals from feeling at ease with their own identity and forces them to keep their sexual orientation hidden from everybody at all costs.

Method: invite the teen to say the following sentence out loud: "A gay man/ a lesbian woman/a bisexual person/a transsexual person is...", and then complete it by adding whatever comes to his/her mind.

The teen repeats the sentence several times until a variety of statements have been spoken. This allows the teen to work on the stereotypes and prejudice he/she has internalised. For instance, one lesbian teen could say to the counsellor: "A lesbian woman is not feminine; that's disgusting".

Please note: before using this exercise, you need to establish a trusting relationship with the teen, so that he/she will feel comfortable enough to open up to you; it is useful to start by telling the teen that whatever he/she will say is ok and that there is nothing wrong with it.

The Two Chairs

Aim: to work on a person's indecision on whether or not to come out. The purpose of this activity is to investigate the reasons why a person chooses (or does not choose) to come out and the emotions connected with that.



Method: put a chair in front of the teen and ask him/her to imagine that a part of him/herself is seated there. Explain that this is the part which is undecided about whether or not to come out and leads him/her to hide his/her sexual orientation. The teen must then address this alter-ego and then goes to sit on the empty chair and tries to explain how he/she feels after listening to the other self.

Please note: this work tries to highlight creative behaviours taking into account the feelings and emotions of both parties. Make sure that the teen looks at both the positive and negative sides of his/her possible coming out.

This exercise may be particularly indicated for teens who have already explored the cognitive aspects involved with coming out but still have problems dealing with the emotional aspects. It cannot, therefore, be used at the start of the counselling process.

Coming Out to the Family

Aim: to work on the decision to come out.

Method: ask the person to imagine coming out to his/her family. What person would he/she tell first? How would he/she do it? What would he/she say? What does he/she think his/her parents' reaction would be? How would he/she react him/herself? How does he/she feel while doing this imagination exercise?

Please note: do not try to convince the person to come out. Even if this exercise works well for him/her, it still has to be his/her own decision.

