

The Journey for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender Individuals and Their Families
By Lynne M. Knobloch-Fedders, PhD, and Karen Krefman, MSMFT, LMFT

“Identity development” – the process each person goes through while trying to define his or her own personality style, preferences, goals, values and significant relationships – is an ongoing, interactive process that continues throughout the life span. Developing a sexual identity is one key piece of this process.

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) individuals, the coming out process (the private realization and/or disclosure of their sexual orientation) is often a watershed moment. However, coming out itself is just one stage in an ongoing process of identity development – the struggle to develop a mature sense of self that incorporates sexual orientation along with other personal attributes into an integrated whole.

Although most of the focus of the coming out process is on the LGBT individual, parents and families also experience their own journey toward establishing integrated family identities in the wake of the coming out process. This is also not a one-time event, but an ongoing process that takes a lot of time. The current historical trend towards more openness, and less shame, around the coming out process can help LGBT individuals and their families work toward greater awareness and acceptance of themselves and each other.

The coming out process for LGBT individuals

The timing of the coming out process is not uniform for every person; LGBT individuals may come out as teenagers, in midlife or later in life. There are also legitimate reasons why people never come out or openly declare their sexual orientation – fear of discrimination or prejudice, lack of social support, religious beliefs, etc.

Several stage models have been developed to describe an LGBT individual’s coming out process. A popular model identifies the following four stages:

Awareness. During the awareness stage, a person recognizes emerging same-sex feelings and attractions. This is often a time of confusion and conflict, as the person attempts to make sense of these feelings and place them into a social or personal context.

Acknowledgment. It is during the acknowledgment phase that a person comes to realize he or she is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. This phase is marked by a struggle for self-acceptance, as well as acceptance by important others (family members, friends, peers, etc.). The LGBT individual may choose to disclose to others or come out during this stage. However, it also is important to remember that disclosure itself is not a one-time event – LGBT individuals don’t come out to everyone all at once. Instead, they may choose to disclose to some people but not others, depending on such factors as timing, social context, the quality of the relationship, etc.

Exploration. During this stage, the person begins to explore his or her sexual identity through the formation of emotional and sexual relationships.

Identity integration. The identity integration stage is marked by the person's acceptance of his or her own sexuality. Greater clarity of personal identity, as well as deeper self-acceptance, is achieved. Sexual identity is incorporated as one part of the person's larger, overall identity.

The coming out process for families of LGBT individuals

As previously noted, the families of LGBT individuals experience their own process of coming out, which is often triggered by the LGBT individual's disclosure of his or her sexual orientation to the family. Families typically experience the following three stages:

Disclosure. Families are often taken by surprise by the LGBT individual's disclosure of his or her sexual orientation. Families may be flooded by a huge range of negative feelings, including confusion, fear, denial, guilt, anxiety, inadequacy or shame. In response to these overwhelming feelings, families may try to cope by avoiding their feelings or not talking about them. Ironically, this may cause parents to go "into the closet" just as their child has come out of it.

Ambivalence. During this stage, families are still dealing with the stigma of the LGBT individual's sexual orientation. Parents especially may grieve the loss of preconceived fantasies about what they thought their child would be. However, positive developments may also occur during this stage – families may begin to see the positive aspects of the LGBT individual's sexual orientation, or family members may take some risks to disclose their own thoughts and feelings to trusted others.

Integration. Resilient families may reach the integration stage, which is marked by a true acceptance of the LGBT individual. Gains and losses associated with the person's sexual identity are reconciled. Parents may be more open and accepting, both of their child and their child's partners. The integration stage is marked by a deeper understanding of the LGBT individual, as well as strengthened relationships within the family. Unfortunately, not all families reach this stage – to achieve it, families must be able to practice direct communication, openness, acceptance and the ability to take each other's perspective.

Tips for LGBT individuals and their families

For LGBT individuals and their families experiencing the coming out process, a few of the following tips may be helpful.

Remember that this is a process for both the individual and the family. It takes time, so move at your own pace, and try not to rush yourself. Cut yourself some slack – this process takes time, and there is no "right way" or "wrong way" to do it. However, it is best if you acknowledge your feelings and talk about them, instead of avoiding or denying them, as much as possible, even if this is difficult at first.

Seek support. Whether it comes from trusted friends, relatives, coworkers, family members, mental health professionals or support groups, positive social support and a place to talk without fear of judgment or criticism is essential.

Try to acknowledge your own feelings as legitimate, and accept them as best you can, without being self-critical. Be open and honest with yourself.

Educate yourself. There are a variety of well-written resources for families of LGBT individuals that can be enormously useful to you. The internet also provides a wealth of information. Additionally, you may want to check newspaper listings for educational programs or support networks in your area. Although prejudice against LGBT individuals still exists, remember that conditions have improved in society tremendously over the past 20 years.

Psychotherapy for LGBT individuals and their families, alone or together, may be very helpful. LGBT individuals enter counseling to seek help with a variety of issues: disclosing sexual orientation to parents or family members, navigating couple relationships, integrating their identity or coping with societal stigma. Families may also benefit from psychotherapy in order to work through their own feelings and experiences.

About Karen Krefman, MSMFT, LMFT

Karen Krefman is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and the Vice President for Strategy and Planning at The Family Institute at Northwestern University. She is involved in the Midlife and Beyond Program for Maturing Adults. She is also a clinical member and an approved supervisor of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT). Ms. Krefman treats individuals, couples and families.

About Lynne Knobloch-Fedders, PhD

Lynne Knobloch-Fedders is a licensed clinical psychologist and the coordinator of research at The Family Institute at Northwestern University. In addition, she is an assistant clinical lecturer in Northwestern University's Master of Science in Marital and Family Therapy Program. Dr. Knobloch-Fedders treats individual adults, couples, families and adolescents. She also specializes in psychotherapy research and treatment development for couples in which one person suffers from depression.

The Family Institute at Northwestern University is the Midwest's oldest and largest center for marital and family therapy, education, and research. The Institute provides counseling and psychotherapy throughout the Chicago metropolitan area, including community-based mental health services for low-income, at-risk families. It also operates nationally-renowned graduate programs in family therapy and psychology at Northwestern University and conducts important research projects that lead to better understanding and treatment of mental health issues. The Family Institute is an independent, not-for-profit organization responsible for its own funding.

Material on The Family Institute website is protected by copyright law. Permission to use, copy, reprint or otherwise reproduce and/or distribute material from this website, in whole or in part, is prohibited without prior written consent.