

The Avenue Community Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity

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**Read This
Before
Coming Out
To Your
Parents**



6--True Acceptance

Some parents get this far. When asked if they wish that their child were straight, they respond, "I'd wish that society to be more accepting of gay people so my child could live without knowing fear or rejection." Parents at this stage begin to understand the problems they unknowingly created for their child.

They also begin to re-think how they have treated gay people before your coming out. Some will become active in fighting against homophobia. Others will talk to and educate their friends and other family members about gay issues. Some will open their arms and homes to their children's gay and lesbian friends. Others will reach out to help other parents accept their children being gay or lesbian. In short, they'll become committed to fighting for gay rights and gay acceptance in whatever way they feel most comfortable.

Epilogue

About two years prior to knowing about Ted, we began to sense that our son was drifting away from the family. We thought it was simply a stage he was going through. In an effort to help him we tried at different times to reach him. One month we'd try to be his friends. When that didn't work, we tried bringing him to his senses by being confrontational and demanding. Nothing worked. It never crossed our minds that his being gay and our lack of understanding related to the problem. We now look on it as an unplanned journey. Unplanned, however, does not mean unwelcome. We've been able to support our son on his journey. Today we can say, "We're glad we know."

5--Personal Decision Making

As your parents go through these phases, their ability to cope with the situation will improve. It is likely they will stop and consider the situation. Deciding on how they can and will deal with you and your sexual orientation. There are several possible outcomes.

Here are three possibilities:

In some instances, everything you do and say is seen as a symptom of your 'problem'. They may even try to remove the problem by removing you. Often it is only one parent that feels this way. Generally speaking, if one parent takes a negative position, the other parent has trouble taking the opposite stance. This type of situation can make home life very difficult.

Sometimes parents will only accept your sexuality to a certain point. They will treat you with love and respect but, when it comes to your sexuality will want to avoid it or deal with it at arms length. Do not take this as a rejection of who you are. Some people have great difficulty in dealing with a gay son or lesbian daughter. Know and respect their limits on this. You can still, gently and slowly, continue your efforts to reach out to them.

Most parents, after adjusting to this new knowledge, will be as accepting and loving of you as they were before you came out. They will become more and more aware of your needs and the problems you face. There is a chance they will become pro-gay activists. Some will even feel that your relationship has improved due to the honesty, trust and mutual respect.

These are just three possibilities, from bad to good. There are many different possible outcomes. You know your parents best, consider their most likely reactions. You may need to be prepared for the worst, to move out and stay with other family members or friends. Whatever happens stay true to yourself and for as long as you can keep reaching out to your parents.

Read This Before Coming Out to Your Parents

Below are some questions you should think about and try to answer. Be completely honest with your answers. It is important that you feel comfortable with yourself and your answers before considering telling your parents or anyone else.

When did you start thinking of yourself as gay or lesbian?
What did the word mean for you then; and now?

What do you think the words gay and lesbian mean to each member of your family?

How long did it take for you to accept being gay or lesbian?

Do you think it would take your family less time or more to accept you being gay?

Who in your family, do you think, would have the hardest time accepting you being gay?

Who in your family, do you think, would have the easiest time accepting you being gay?

In what ways would your relationship with your family change after you came out?

Coming out is a difficult decision to make. It takes time and you need to be completely ready for whatever might happen. Only you will know the right time and how to do it--trust yourself.

Coming Out

The purpose of this booklet is to let gay men and lesbians, of any age, know about the process most parents go through when they find out their child is gay or lesbian. The method and suggestions you'll find in this booklet are based on the idea that you suspect that one or both your parents will be understanding. Getting their acceptance and support will probably take time. Some of what you read will be of some help if you suspect that they will not be understanding or maybe even reject you completely.

The Avenue Community Centre, offers a number of programs to help people of all ages get through the coming out process. The biggest one is peer counseling either over the phone or in person at *The Avenue Community Centre's* office. You'll find contact info on the back of this booklet.

It is important that you remember that each family and person is different. Most parents will go through the phases covered here. Some however may stay in one phase longer than another, others will skip a phase altogether; everyone is different. Just knowing about the different phases will help you, by giving you some idea of what to expect-good or bad.

Chances are that when you finally decide the time is right to come out, you'll expect your parents to understand and accept right away. You need to be realistic. How long did it take YOU to come to terms with being gay or lesbian? It will probably take your parents as long or longer. They may need you to teach them about what coming out means to you and why it's so important to you. You will need to be respectful of their feelings because, they will have to come out too, as the parents of a gay child.

to support them. An example of how you could do this is:

"The truth is nobody knows for sure what makes people gay, so there is no point in blaming yourself or anyone else. What's important now is trying to come to terms with everything-and I want you to know that I'm here to help you as much as I can."

You can help in a variety of ways:

Be prepared. Have a list of books they can read. Books allow them to learn at their own pace and privately. *The Avenue Community Centre* has a brochure on suggested books to read.

You can have them contact *The Avenue Community Centre* for support too. *The Avenue Community Centre* can also put your parents in contact with PFLAG, Parents, Family & Friends of Lesbians And Gays. PFLAG members have been through what your parents have been through and can give them support and answer questions parent to parent.

4 -- Feelings Expressed

When it's clear that guilt and self-blame are not productive, parents may want to ask questions, hear the answers and accept their feelings. This is when you and your parents will have the best talks. This is also when their feelings will come out too. "I'm disappointed I won't have grandkids." "Please, don't tell anyone else." "I feel so alone and hurt-I think I was better off not knowing."

It may seem hateful and cruel but felling angry and hurt are the most common feelings that many parents feel. But it is worse if you don't talk and make some effort to deal with these feelings. You may feel like you should pull back, that maybe you shouldn't have told them, but you need to be true to yourself and those you love so hang in there. Remember once these feelings come up and you and your parents deal with them you will be able to move on, because acceptance is closer now than it was before.

It's likely that they will think homosexuality is not normal. You can explain that, heterosexuality is only the most common sexual orientation, that there are two other orientations: bisexuality and homosexuality. Point out that not everyone's nature is the same. Some people are right-handed others left. Some people are scientific and others are creative. You need to make them understand that you are being true to your own nature.

If their denial takes the form of "I don't want to talk about it" you may want to, gently and carefully, reach out to them again in about a week. You may want to bring up the subject again with something like this: "Dad, I've been wanting to talk to you about this. Please, don't push me out of your life. I love you and want you to continue loving me, but I need to be honest too."

Be prepared to deal with you parents separately. This allows each of them to process what you've revealed to them at their own pace. This is a very big issue and you need to be considerate of their need to deal with this.

3--Guilt

What did I do wrong? Whether I viewed the cause as genetic or environmental, I was clearly to blame. I questioned the kind of male role model I had provided and that forced me to examine my masculinity. For a while, no matter which angle I viewed the situation from, I believed I was the main source of the problem. Then my wife said, "It's unreasonable for you to take the blame, you've raised two sons, one straight, one gay. It's not us, it must be something else."

When parents feel guilty, they are not focused on you but themselves. They may be too wrapped up blaming themselves to see that you are a happy person or that you have new issues to deal with. Many parents see being gay as a 'problem' and ask, "What causes it?" They may think being a poor parent is the reason. Be prepared to remind them that they raised you to be honest and you're being honest. You will need to be ready to teach them and

You may become impatient. You may need to answer the same questions or explain yourself again and again. Try not to get upset. Your parents may need a lot of time to adjust to what you've told them, to understand. They, like you, will probably be very emotional right now. It can seem like forever until they accept and understand. Remember, that you are ahead of them in dealing with your being gay, give them time.

Try to be patient-it will be appreciated.

The stages people go through in coming to terms with their child being gay or lesbian are: *shock, denial, guilt, feelings expressed and true acceptance*. Although these stages will apply to most people in your situation, there is no guarantee that your parents will have all these reactions. Your parents may even skip one, repeat one, or go through them in a different order. The progress can take hours, days, months, even years.

Most parents don't know what to expect or how to deal with the 'new you'. Parents who experience the biggest shock when their child comes out, generally speaking, are experiencing the greatest sense of loss. Some parents will withdraw not realizing how this impacts on you.

I remember one morning when my son was fixing breakfast at the stove, as I sat at the kitchen table reading the newspaper. I looked at him and wanted to say, "I don't know who you are, but I wish you'd leave and send my son Ted back."

With understanding and patience from you and your parents your relationship with your parents has a good chance of being as good or better than it was. This is because there is more trust, honesty and mutual respect.

Stages Of Understanding

It is very common for people dealing with major issues in their lives or the lives of their loved ones to go through five separate stages. Each stage brings them closer and closer to understanding and acceptance. No two people move through the stages at the same speed, everyone is different.

1--Shock

Your parents may have no idea that you're gay or lesbian. Your coming out may shock them which is a natural reaction. It may last a few minutes to days, even weeks.

You may want to tell them that you have not been completely honest with them and that this has put distance between you and them. Tell them you want and need to be honest. Tell them you love them. **Say it more than once.**

They may not respond positively at first, it may take time to sink in when they're alone. Don't be afraid to remind them that, "You loved me before I told you, and I haven't changed. I know it doesn't seem so to you right now, but I am still the same person. I just want to share all my life with you and not just a part of it."

Occasionally, a parent will not be shocked at all. "I always knew you were different; I thought you might be gay. It's OK. I love you but I need you to help me understand and accept this." "We've known for a long time. We've been waiting for you to tell us." Telling them in these cases will be much easier because they will have already worked through some of the stages on their own.

2--Denial

Denial is a kind of defense, protecting them from an unknown situation. It is different from shock because they have heard what you said, they're just making a knee-jerk reaction. Denial can be expressed in many ways:

Anger: "No kid of mine is going to be queer!"

Uncaring: "If that's what you choose, I don't want to hear about it."

Ignoring It: "That's nice dear. What do you want for supper?"

Rejection: "It's just a phase, you'll grow out of it."

My wife and I were sure that our son had been caught up in some form of gay liberation activity that appealed to him because it seemed dangerous and exciting. We thought that the media coverage about homosexuality probably attracted him and that he lacked maturity to know what he really wanted. We insisted that he go to a psychiatrist. We agreed to visit the doctor, too. After two or three visits, Ted's psychiatrist shredded our defense mechanisms of denial, "I've counseled many gay young adults and I'm convinced that this is no passing fancy; to the best of my knowledge, your son is gay."

You may want to be ready to suggest they get some counseling. If they press you to see a counselor, suggest that they match you session for session. They may resist saying they don't need any help. Underneath, they will probably welcome someone to talk to.