

When a Student (or friend) "Comes Out" to You

Adapted from a flyer by the Youth Service Bureau of Wellington, Ottawa.

We live in a society that often discriminates against people who are different. We have all been taught to believe that to be "straight" is to be normal. This can cause a great deal of pain for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people. "Coming out," or disclosing their orientation to others, is an important step in LGB people's self-acceptance. Like everyone, LGB people accept themselves better if others accept them.

Someone who is coming out feels close enough to you and trusts you sufficiently to be honest and risk losing you as a friend. It is difficult to know what to say and do to be a supportive friend or ally to someone who has "come out" to you. Below are some suggestions you may wish to follow.

- Thank the student for having the courage to tell you. Choosing to tell you means that they have a great deal of respect and trust for you.
- Don't judge the student. If you have strong religious or other beliefs about homosexuality, keep them to yourself for now. There will be plenty of time in the future for you to think and talk about your beliefs in light of your friend's orientation.
- Respect the student's confidentiality. They probably are not ready to tell others right away and want to tell people in their own way.
- Tell the student that you still care about him or her, no matter what. Be the source of support you have always been. The main fear for people coming out is that their friends, mentors, and family will reject them.
- Don't be too serious. Sensitively worded humor may ease the tension you are both probably feeling.
- Ask any questions you may have, but understand that the student may not have all the answers. You can save some questions for later or, better yet, you can find some of the answers together.
- Offer and be available to support the student as they "come out" to others.
- Make contact frequently during the time right after the student has come out to you. This will let them know you are still friends.
- Be prepared for the student to have mood swings. Coming out can be very traumatic. Anger and depression are common, especially if friends or family have trouble accepting the individual's orientation. Don't take mood swings personally. Be flattered you are close enough to risk sharing any feelings of anger or frustration.
- Do what you have always done together. Your student probably feels that coming out will change everything in their life, and this is frightening. Do not change routines of conversations, advising appointments, etc. If you always go to the movies on Friday, then continue that. If you meet about a student organization or campus project with the student, continue that as well.
- Talk about other LGB people you know. If the student knows you have accepted someone else, they will feel more comfortable that you will accept them.
- Learn about the LGB community. This will allow you to better support your student, and knowing about their world will help prevent you from drifting apart.
- Don't allow the student to become isolated. Let them know about organizations and places where they can meet other LGB people or supportive allies.

- If the individual seems afraid about people knowing, there may be a good reason. People are sometimes attacked violently because they are perceived as LGB. Sometimes people are discriminated against in such things as housing and employment. If your student is discriminated against illegally, you can help them in pursuing their rights.
- Don't worry that someone coming out to you may have attractions or feelings for you that you may not share. If they have more or different feelings than you have, these can be worked through. It's the same as if someone of the opposite sex had feelings for you that you don't share. Either way, it's probably not worth losing the student-mentor relationship or friendship that you have maintained prior to this point.
- It's never too late. If someone has come out to you before and you feel badly about how you handled it, you can always go back and try again.