

Frequently Asked Questions: COMING OUT

What is Coming out?

Coming out is the process of recognizing, accepting, and sharing with others one's sexual identity. The term "coming out" is a shortened version of the phrase "coming out of the closet," which is a metaphor for revealing one's sexual orientation. Coming out is not a single event, but a life-long process.

In our society, people generally assume that everyone is heterosexual, so persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual must continually decide in what situations and with whom they want to correct that assumption by disclosing their sexual orientation. In every new situation, with every new person they meet, they must decide whether or not to come out.

There are many stages in the coming out process, and the process is not exactly the same for every person. Generally, the coming out process begins with coming out to oneself: the internal process a lesbian, gay, or bisexual person goes through in recognizing and accepting their sexual orientation. This can be frightening and depressing at first for many people, because they, like almost everyone in our society, have learned negative stereotypes and many myths about homosexuality as they were growing up.

Later stages of coming out involve choosing to disclose one's sexual orientation to others. Coming out can be a very long and difficult struggle because it involves not only confronting the constant assumption that one is heterosexual, but also confronting homophobic attitudes and discriminatory practices along the way.

Ultimately, however coming out can be a very freeing experience for persons who are LGBT, because it allows them to live a more honest life and develop more genuine relationships with others. Coming out does not solve all of an individual's problems; indeed, it may create new ones. Weighing the advantages and disadvantages of coming out is part of the process.

There are different levels of being out, ranging from completely closeted (not revealing one's sexual orientation to anyone) to being publicly out (willing to reveal one's sexual orientation publicly). An individual may be out to some people and not to others, or out in some situations, but closeted in others. For example, a person might be out to friends, but not to their family. A person might be out at school, but not in their hometown. Someone might be out in his or her church, but not in his or her professional life. The phrases below describe different degrees to which an individual might be in or out of the closet:

Why Come out? Benefits and Risks

Many times, coming out allows a person to develop as a whole individual, allows for greater empowerment, and makes it easier for an individual to develop a positive self-

image. By coming out, the person is able to share with others who they are and what is important to them, rather than having to hide or lie about their identity. Coming out frees the person of the fear of being “found out” and helps them avoid living a double life, which can be extremely stressful and demoralizing. Finally, coming out makes it easier to connect with people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual, giving a sense of community. Outlining some of the benefits and risks of coming out is not meant to convince anyone to choose to come out or not come out in any given situation. Rather, thinking about some of the possible outcomes of such a choice can clarify an individual’s decision by helping them determine the appropriate time for coming out and preparing them for possible reactions.

Some Benefits of Coming Out

- Ability to live one’s life honestly.
- Building self-esteem by being honest about oneself.
- Developing closer, more genuine relationships with friends and family.
- Alleviating the stress of hiding one’s identity.
- Connecting with other people who are LGBT.
- Being part of a community with others with whom you have something in common.
- Helping to dispel myths and stereotypes by speaking about one’s own experience and educating others.
- Being a role model for others.

Some Risks of Coming Out

- Not everyone will be understanding or accepting.
- Family, friends, or coworkers may be shocked or confused, or even hostile.
- Some relationships may be permanently changed.
- An individual may experience harassment or discrimination.
- People under the age of 18 may be thrown out of their homes or lose financial support from their parents.

Where can I get support if I am coming out at MSU?

The LGBT Center is located in Student Center Room 423 and provides a safe space for students to discuss LGBT issues and relax in a non-judgmental atmosphere. The LGBT Center provides programming and workshops for students, faculty, and staff.

MSU’s Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) provides confidential assessment and brief counseling/therapy for students. The service is included in every student’s fees and is therefore free of charge. CAPS is located in the Gilbert House (Behind Freeman Hall).

The GLBTQ Safe Space Program identifies offices of MSU faculty and staff that have gone through training and committed themselves to creating a non-judgmental, LGBT affirming environment. These offices are identified with a sticker or button that reads

“GLBTQ Safe Space”. Such offices are identified with a decal. The decal has a green square with two triangles in the center, one pink and one in black. It reads “GLBTQ Safe Space”.

If someone does not have a GLBTQ Safe Space sticker, it does not necessarily mean they are not GLBTQ affirming. Only individuals who have gone through Safe Space training are able to display the sticker. If you don't see a sticker on an office, look for other signs that the space is safe (i.e. rainbow flags, LGBT themed books, etc).

Other Locations to explore are:

- Health Center (Blanton Hall)
- Women's Center (SC 420)
- Center for Non-Violence and Peace Initiatives (SC 2nd Floor)
- Health Promotion Office (Bohn Hall)
- Disability Resource Center (Morehead Hall)
- GLBTQ Studies Minor (Dickson Hall)
- Women and Gender Studies Program