



Navigating Disclosure

Setting Yourself Up for
Success with the Who, What,
Where, When, and How

Pros

- Potential to gain support
- One less thing to deal with
- It's the truth
- Opportunity to live a fuller, more authentic life
- Less need to hide
- Gets rid of the secret, which reduces shame
- Opportunity to develop closer relationships with others
- Gives others the opportunity to understand what you're going through
- Opportunity to provide support to others

Cons

- It's scary
- Not everyone is accepting (at least not right away)
- Potential to lose support
- Some relationships may permanently change
- Greater risk of experiencing violence, harassment, and/or discrimination
- Saying it out loud to others makes it more real
- Have to figure out how to address invasive and/or inappropriate questions
- For trans* folks: may have to deal with the pronoun problem

Why

Mother:

- *"My mom strongly upholds all of the views of her church and one of those is being totally anti-gay. She is very conservative and not very accepting."* – **Lesbian, age 65**
- *"It was experimentation. I didn't think it was any of her business, as it was none of her business how many men partners I had."* – **Bisexual woman, age 61**
- *"Don't want to stress her out. Her oldest brother was casualty of the AIDS epidemic in the early 90s."* – **Gay man, age 43**
- *"I always felt she already knew. I always meant to have 'the conversation' but the time never seemed right."* – **Gay man, age 57**
- *"It's just never come up. I rarely discuss details of my love life with anyone since I am a deeply private person. If I were to make a serious commitment to another woman, I would tell my mother about it"* – **Bisexual woman, age 39**

Father:

- *"This is not a subject to discuss or tell anyone about, ever, except those with whom I may enjoy having sex with. It's not my identity. It is an activity – like bowling, or gardening, or pick-up basketball games in the neighborhood, or joining the PTA – except that it's more intimate & personal, as a matter of discretion and respect for proper behavior in polite society."* – **Bisexual woman, age 54**
- *"I doubt he would have any clue what I was talking about or why I was bringing it to him or what it meant."* – **Transgender person, age 19**
- *"He's very religious and he observed my orientation before I outwardly expressed it. It was like a silent acknowledgement but not acceptance."* – **Lesbian, age 58**
- *"Unless I decide to be with a girl long term, there is no reason for him to know."* – **Bisexual woman, age 25**
- *"He was homophobic, plus we had a rocky relationship. I was very conflicted about him. I wanted his love."* – **Gay man, age 86**
- *"He's not as open minded as my mother, so [I'm] waiting."* – **Bisexual man, age 26**

Why

- *"It is always nerve-wracking when I come out to someone, but I have had a positive reaction from everyone I have told, except for my dad. My mom and I were already very close, so it didn't affect our relationship. Nearly everyone in my life knows, and if someone new comes into my life, I tell him or her. If this person cannot accept that I am gay, then he or she does not need to be a part of my life."* **-Lesbian, age 25, first told someone at age 13**
- *"I wish I would have told people sooner. I came of age when AIDS first emerged and homophobia was acceptable. I wasted too many years being afraid of my sexuality and making choices that allowed me to hide in the background of life. I was sort of a professional wallflower."* **-Gay man, age 43, first told someone at age 22**
- *"In the beginning, it was difficult, but always ended up positive. Nowadays, there really is no decision. I simply have a sexual orientation the same as anyone else, and talk about my partner, etc., the same way anyone mentions their opposite-sex spouse, and there's no "event" associated with it."* **-Gay man, age 57, first told someone at age 21**
- *"The hardest thing is just... there's really no good way to bring it up. You almost hope people will ask, because it's just sort of a burden, carrying around a secret. For my parents, I was mostly worried that they wouldn't take it seriously and treat it as a phase. For my friends, I was scared they would think I was hitting on them. I come from a pretty Catholic, Midwestern town, so it was rough."* **-Bisexual woman, age 20, first told someone at age 14**
- *"It was extremely difficult to come out to my family. I didn't do so until I was in my 30's. Thankfully, my family said they loved me no matter what. Many of my friends weren't as fortunate to have such a positive response. It's still not something my family really discusses but I am happy that I was finally able to share my orientation with them."* **-Bisexual woman, age 41, first told someone at age 17**
- *"It's always on a case by case basis. Those who love me and truly care for me have, of course, been the most understanding. My brother has actually taken the news the best; much better than I even expected. He's met the current guy I'm dating and they hit it off well."* **-Bisexual man, age 31, first told someone at age 18**
- *"My first 'coming out' was in a Facebook post. My friends have been cool; they generally use the right pronouns once that was explained and they all call me my chosen name now which is just wonderful. Now on the internet and in association with peers and fan culture, I am out. The people I am not out to generally include adults, such as coworkers or friends parents, and my own family – I don't feel that, as the average person (and not in a more accepting youthful age), they would really 'believe' in nonbinary genders or understand me saying that I am one."* **-Transgender person, age 19**

Who

- Spouse/Partner/Significant Other(s)/Potential Sex Partners
 - Parents
 - Siblings
 - Children
 - Extended Family
 - Friends
 - Neighbors
 - Healthcare Providers/Mental Health Providers
 - Faith Community
 - School Administrators
 - Supervisors
 - Colleagues
 - Strangers/The Public
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- Prioritize your list based on who needs to know, who you'd like to tell, who you don't care as much whether or not they know, and who you'd prefer not to tell

What

- Think about your goals:
 - Conveying information
 - Preserving the relationship
 - Maintaining dignity and self-respect
- Consider what words you'd like to use to share this information about yourself
- Try scripting the conversation out ahead of time (this can be helpful whether you're planning to disclose, or whether you're planning to set boundaries)
- If you're planning to disclose, remember that not everyone knows proper terminology to use, so you may need to come prepared to provide some education

Where

- Consider disclosing in a neutral environment where both you and whoever you're disclosing to are likely to feel safe
- Have a plan for how to get out of the situation safely if the person/people you're disclosing to react poorly
- If you're disclosing at work, consider having HR present as part of the conversation

When

- When you've come to an acceptable level of self-acceptance
- When you're prepared (emotionally, psychologically, financially, etc.) to deal with a variety of possible responses
- When you're prepared to answer questions and set boundaries without becoming overly defensive

How

- Consider whether you'd like to talk about this in person, via phone, by letter or email, texting, etc.
- Consider what kind of other support might be helpful for you to have in the moment
 - Invite a friend or support person to be a part of the conversation
 - Make plans with a support person for afterwards that you will keep regardless of how it goes
- Model the behavior/communication style that you'd like to receive in return
- Come prepared with information and resources so that others can educate themselves at their own pace
- Use "I" statements
 - I think...
 - I feel...
 - I need...

Practice

- Choose a person-- it can be anyone
- Take 5-10 minutes and write a letter to this person, practicing what you would say if you chose to disclose to them
- If there's no one that you're considering disclosing to, write a letter to a person explaining why you wouldn't disclose to them
- Try to convey the information using "I" statements as much as possible
- If you have time, brainstorm some responses that you're comfortable with to questions you can anticipate from this person

Helpful Tips

- Manage your expectations; work on acceptance of the moment as it is
- Remember that someone's first reaction is not always their final reaction
- State what you're going through as a fact; you don't have to ask for permission or forgiveness
- Work on defining the kind of support you're looking for from others
- Understand that others may need some time and space to digest this information that is new to them even though you may have been dealing with it yourself for quite some time

Resources

- HRC Guide to Coming Out: <http://www.hrc.org/resources/resource-guide-to-coming-out>
- HRC Information for the Emerging Ally: <http://www.hrc.org/resources/straight-guide-to-lgbt-americans>
- Research- Is coming out always a good thing?: <http://www.impactprogram.org/research-blog/is-coming-out-always-a-good-thing/#sthash.ePC8MWuk.dpbs>
- Pew Research Center- the coming out experience: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/chapter-3-the-coming-out-experience/>
- HIV Disclosure Tips: <http://www.thebody.com/content/art6111.html>
- HRC Trans Visibility Guide: <http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/transgender-visibility-guide>
- HRC Coming Out in the Workplace: <http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/coming-out-in-the-workplace-as-transgender>
- Tips for Trans-Allies: <http://www.glaad.org/transgender/allies>
- GLAAD Transgender Resources: <http://www.glaad.org/transgender/resources>