

1. Finding Out

To 'love' is a great feeling. When two men who love each other kiss and cuddle or keep the neighbors awake at night with their possibly too loud expressions of passion, nothing feels more natural, warm and nice to them. It's the culture in which gays and lesbians are raised which all too often makes their romantic and physical love into a problem: a problem where none actually exists. Unfortunately, the cultural condemnation can seep into the minds of young gays and lesbians, making it hard for them to accept their feelings. This may keep them in the proverbial closet for a long time. Being open about having feelings for someone of the same sex is scary to many. How and when can you step out of the closet and what are the possible consequences?

Hey - I'm gay!

Especially in the beginning, it can be hard to interpret the 'unusual' feelings you're experiencing as a gay man. You love men, but not in the same way your straight friends love their buddies. The need for physical contact doesn't stop at a cheery hug when your team wins the match. And your idea of bonding with a guy you're attracted to goes further than silently staring at your rods during a fishing trip. (Please note: we're talking *fishing* rods here.) You want to look deep into his eyes and feel his body up against yours, shifting your heart and crotch into a higher gear. You want to share your most intimate thoughts and emotions with a guy, but also a bed and a life.

After the realization that the feelings you have for men are romantic ones, coupled with sexual ones, it can be a struggle to align them with the things you were taught while growing up. You are aware that friends and parents have different expectations of you and that you are 'unusual' in a way people often make fun of or are hateful about. If you are lucky, there will be openly gay men in your social circle you can identify with. If not, you may first learn about homosexuality through the prejudices and clichés circulating among the people around you. The image of gays and lesbians as shaped by the media doesn't always help the process of self-acceptance either. 'Extreme' and 'flamboyant' gay behavior gets a disproportionate amount of attention, and unremarkable or inconspicuous gay men are disregarded or forgotten about, because they are deemed less newsworthy. On the one hand, visibility in the media, during Gay Pride for instance, can set someone who is still in the closet to thinking about his own sexual orientation and make him feel less alone. However,

the spectacle can also alienate gay men because they don't recognize themselves in it. Not all gay men have a thing for leather and machismo or for makeup and drag.

But once you do a little research yourself, for instance on the internet, you will find there are a lot of men just like you and you will realize that you don't need to adjust your personality to live a happy life. But even after you've disproved the warped, public image of gay men to yourself, the reality is that the people around you may still cling to it. The fear of association with that image can keep someone in the closet for a long time. It even has some men lingering at the threshold their entire life.

Homosexuality is a taboo in many cultures and religions and especially being open about such feelings is a big deal. Though gays and lesbians exist all over the globe, it's often not a problem until they decide to stop being secretive about it and put a label on themselves. In large parts of the world, homosexuality is tolerated as long as it happens with discretion, behind closed doors. By 'coming out' in a culture like that, you are forcing the people around you to deal with something they may already have known but were trying to ignore. It forces them to have a response, which might be unexpectedly positive but is more likely to be negative, because of social pressures or religious beliefs. The concept of being 'gay' as an identity is seen as a Western phenomenon in many countries and as an unwanted influence, threatening the local culture. This culture is likely based on a 'don't ask, don't tell' principle which may pervade all aspects of the society.

Of course, it is extremely difficult to like oneself in a culture which thinks you are a disease.

Chrystos, writer

Preparations & consequences

Within a 'traditional' upbringing, there isn't a lot of space or attention for homosexuality. Even if it is accepted with regards to people outside of the local social circle, it's often seen as something that only affects other people. When you realize you're gay, being open about those feelings to close family and your best friends can be a tough process; you will probably not be entirely sure how the revelation will go down.

Before you come out of the closet, it is however important to try to predict how your friends and family will react and what kind of consequences a negative response would have. Be prepared that they might need some time to deal with the news, even if they have friends who

are gay and homosexuality isn't necessarily an issue for them. Though they may not realize it, parents often have an 'ideal' future in mind which they may have to say goodbye to: a marriage, kids and a daughter-in-law. That being gay doesn't have to be a major hindrance as far as marriage and grandchildren are concerned — in some Western countries, in any case — is a realization that may not come straight away.

They may also have a distorted view of homosexuality, with HIV, discrimination, shame and loneliness playing major roles. Sometimes parents will suspect what is going on and take the initiative to ask, "Do you like guys?" But that is a relatively rare occurrence. From the perspective of parents, this is not surprising; these feelings generally come to the fore during puberty, and that's an age at which guardians are generally seen as a pain to begin with. You're wrestling with your identity and don't want to deviate from the norm, so things could take a bad turn if your well-intentioned parents ask if you are gay.

If you're not sure if you will get a positive response, try to gain a comfortable amount of independence before coming out to your parents. This means you can still make ends meet if things go off the rails and living with them becomes difficult or impossible. If you are relatively sure ahead of time that major drama will ensue, you will have to weigh the downsides of living in the closet or leading a



(temporary) double life — only openly gay around a select group of friends — against the problems you'd have to deal with were you to fully come out. Should you deem it necessary to remain in the closet with certain people for a while, don't feel too guilty about it. You're not just doing it for yourself, you're also doing it because you're afraid the truth might hurt those people: misguiding them — at least for a while — may be necessary to protect them.

If you're from a family with a 'don't ask, don't tell' approach to things, it might be possible to sneak out of the closet without making any official statement. In this situation, everyone knows what is going on, but nobody is verbalizing it to avoid confrontation, and people won't feel obliged to respond in a negative way. Your boyfriend might end up officially being a 'roommate' but be accepted otherwise. Of course, this

only works if the entire family is willing to go along with the pretense. It's not the most satisfying of solutions, but can sometimes be the only way to be in a relationship while not losing touch with your family.

The reaction of friends can be hard to predict. Their notions about homosexuality in general can clash with the image they had of you up to that point. In some cases, you will have to do damage control to discredit stereotypes and to make it clear gay men are not all alike. However, because people tend to select their friends based on shared norms and values, it is fairly likely they won't have a problem with it. You may be surprised by the responses it can bring. A friend may have a lesbian mother, gay brother or transgender uncle, and it may not be as new or unusual to them as you thought.

Should there be deep-rooted prejudices getting in the way of certain friendships, you can decide to drop these people, assuming they don't beat you to it. An open-minded, critical conversation can be interesting and can change people's mentality, paving the road for a next generation of gays and lesbians, but you aren't a missionary sent to preach and defend the joys of homosexuality at any cost.

At eleven I already felt attracted to guys, but I needed twelve more years to be open about that. After all, you're growing up in a hetero-normative society, where you can't just be 'different'. There were no gays in my school. The most annoying, I found, were the tough macho-guys who were constantly hitting on girls and bragging about it. Thankfully, I never let myself be pulled into that and I just thought, "my time will come".

Dennis Boutkan, chairman
COC Amsterdam

Senior outing

Coming out of the closet at an advanced age can be complicated. Friends who have known you for a long time, may feel misled because you didn't show them your 'true self' earlier in the game. You will probably have been aware for a while that you are attracted to men and been less than honest about it. Most likely you didn't keep quiet with bad intent, but because of insecurity. It is primarily the fear of losing partners and close friends that prolongs the time people spend in the closet. The long silence is not a game, but a sign you care about your friends and don't want to lose them.

Feelings of deception can be particularly strong when it comes to any current or former female partners or children, if you have any. The feelings an (ex-)partner has can take various forms: anger because she feels betrayed, sadness because feelings were ‘wasted’ on a partner who couldn’t really reciprocate or relief because it explains issues in the relationship, like a mediocre sex life. Unless she believes she can ‘cure’ him, there is no battle to be won for her. That realization may bring sadness but also a certain amount of calm.

Against all reason, a woman may blame herself for her partner’s leanings. Did I repulse him so much that I turned him off all women? What drew him to me, if he actually wants a guy? Am I feminine enough? Why didn’t I notice? How can I have been so blind? Of course, the reality is that a gay man can really care about a woman, and he may be able to find some physical satisfaction. But something will ultimately be lacking. Being in love and overrun by hormones is unlikely, especially in the long run.

Things get even more complicated if kids are involved. It is especially important to not burn bridges with your ex-partner. After all, she will always remain a part of your life. Telling your children you are attracted to men, can be tricky. How much you tell them, how quickly and in what way will depend on their age and the exact situation. Coming out to them at the same time that you are getting a divorce will likely be a complex and emotionally charged process. A bumpy ride should be expected but if things derail completely, get a fresh perspective from a child therapist. The main thing children should be reassured of is that mom and dad love them a lot and that this is not going to change.

The average age at which people come out of the closet has gone down considerably over the last couple of decades. There are fewer gay men who spend their entire life married to a woman, leading a double-life. That is a positive development which saves a lot of couples a lot of pain.

‘Gay’ seems to be the hardest word

The moment you first utter the words “I am gay”, or some variant, remains scary for a lot of people. As a dress rehearsal for your coming out, you may want to practice with a not-so close friend, whose response won’t really affect you. But if you decide to do this, you have to be sure that this person is discrete and not connected to a major gossip network, to avoid losing control over your coming out. An especially good friend

is the next step, and parents will often be the last and most difficult step, because of the important and permanent connection to them.

How do you deliver the happy message? What is definitely wrong is using a gloomy, choked up voice to say, “You have to sit down for a moment, I have something to tell you. I am... (sob, eyes towards the heavens) ... gay!” Don’t make it seem like a big problem or something you are dumping on the person you are talking to. You can give it an airy twist, “Mom, dad... it’s not going to be a daughter-in-law but a son-in-law.” Or, “I’d like a set of matching ‘his’ and ‘his’ towels for my birthday.” If you have trouble getting the word ‘gay’ to cross your lips, you can circumvent it. “I like guys” is clear enough, but less charged — possibly modified with the word “mostly” if you aren’t entirely sure yet. Of course, in that case you can simply wait until you’ve been around the block a bit and are sure. It’s fine to have a boyfriend for a while before revving up to a coming out. Your partner can then support you during the process, though he might need protecting if your parents try to blame him for ‘turning you gay’.

If you don’t feel like committing yourself to the word ‘gay’, you can always label yourself ‘bi’ first and see how your feelings develop. Though truly bisexual men do exist, it’s pretty common for men who initially identify as ‘bi’ to ultimately stick to men once they feel comfortable with it. Putting a label on yourself is not always necessary, but it can help clarify your feelings, both to yourself and to others.

If you are someone who generally doesn’t feel comfortable expressing himself, or if you have some very specific thoughts and feelings you want to make sure come across but are afraid you’ll say something wrong because of nerves, then you can write down your coming out story in the form of a letter or e-mail. You can send it or hand it over personally. In case of the latter, you can stick around while your story is being read and field any questions that might result from it. Sitting there quietly, waiting for a response can be a bit nerve-wrecking, but sending or e-mailing your message might be worse, because there is a longer period of uncertainty while waiting for the reaction. At least make sure you can be reached straight away by the person you’re informing if you do it long-distance. Don’t move into a monastery for a week, leaving question marks hanging in the air.

If you are especially relaxed about it, you can, of course, simply throw the revelation onto your social network site or send a group text message and wait for a reaction. “Hey everybody, it’s official now: I’m gay. If you have any questions or know a hot, single gay guy, let me know. Cheers!”

By being so casual, you leave it up to your friends to make it an issue, should it be one for some of them.

The first time you tell someone you're gay, it will probably feel like a relief. Don't be too surprised if the other person rolls his or her eyes and say, "Yes, of course. So what?" Parents and friends tend to have an inkling even before you do and may have processed and accepted it already before you get around to it. The more people who know you are gay, the more relaxed you will start to feel about it. Hopefully, there will come a time when you are barely aware you are 'outing' yourself to someone by checking out a sexy guy without shame or by referencing your boyfriend, for instance.

It's not necessary to shout from the rooftops about your gayness for too long, even though this can feel good for a while. Realize how irritating it can be if someone who recently became a parent talks about nothing other than kids and nappies or if a friend only wants to talk about his new relationship over and over again. Bottled-up emotions will come bubbling to the surface when you open the closet door, and it will feel like a very big deal to you, but don't expect the people around you to get equally psyched about it. If you are not all that close to someone, wait for an appropriate moment to declare yourself 'gay'. It would be odd to put an official notice up on the bulletin board, for instance. It's a personal issue, which fits awkwardly into a business environment.

You only have one life, so make the best of it, whether you are gay or lesbian. Avoid having to look back at missed opportunities in sadness. For me, this meant coming out to the world at 23 and saying 'I am gay.' I never regretted it for a second. Gone were the annoying questions about the absence of a girlfriend and finally I was free to love who I wanted to love.

Dennis Boutkan,
chairman COC Amsterdam

True to your heart

There are men who immerse themselves completely in the gay scene and the gay subculture when they've just exited the closet. That they are gay ceases to be just one of many aspects of their personality, but becomes the main event. It's a phase that isn't all that damaging, but it's better to get over it. Coming out doesn't oblige you to do anything. You don't have to buy yourself a pair of leather pants, pump iron to score at shirtless

dance parties, swish with your hand and butt more than you do already, redecorate your house or become an avid fan of Madonna or Lady Gaga. You don't even have to sleep with a guy until you feel ready for that. No one will come to take away your Gay Membership Card if you just continue your life as if nothing has changed.

In some Western countries most people may not actually care too much about your leanings. That can be a let-down if you had prepared yourself for a great mental drama and a tragic existence. If you live somewhere tolerant, you'll likely be surprised how small the actual difference is 'before' and 'after', whether you just tell a few trusted friends or come out to the whole world. But you won't be lugging around a big secret anymore. Accepting

who you are will help keep you balanced and make you happier. Coming out of the closet isn't the final step on the road to self-acceptance, but in as far as circumstances allow, it's an important move in the right direction.

The most important political step that any gay man or lesbian can take is to come out of the closet. It's been proven that it is easier to hate us and to fear us if you can't see us.

Amanda Bearse, actress