When Someone Comes Out To You

When someone comes out to you, your initial response is important. The person has likely spent time in advance thinking about whether or not to tell you, and when and how to tell you. Here are some tips to help you support them.

**Listen, listen, listen.** One of the best ways to support someone is to hear them out and let them know you are there to listen. Coming out is a long process, and chances are you’ll be approached again to discuss this process and the challenges and joys of being out.

**Appreciate the person’s courage.** There is often a risk in telling someone something personal, especially sharing for the first time one’s gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation, when it is generally misunderstood and/or controversial. Consider someone’s coming out as a gift and thank them for giving that gift to you. Sharing this personal information with you means that they respect and trust you.

**Offer support, but don’t assume the person needs any help.** The person may be completely comfortable with their gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation, and may not need help dealing with it or be in need of any support. It may be that they just wanted to tell someone, or just simply to tell you so you might know them better. Offer and be available to support them, if they need it, as they come out to others.

**Ask questions that demonstrate understanding, acceptance, and compassion.** Some suggestions are:

- Have you been able to tell anyone else?
- Do you feel safe on campus? At home? At work?
- Do you feel supported by others in your life?
- Do you need support of any kind? Someone to listen? Resources?

**Remember that the person has not changed.** They are still the same person you knew before the disclosure; you just have more information about them, which might improve your relationship. Let them know that you feel the same way about them as you always have and that they are still the same person. If you are shocked, try not to let the surprise lead you to view or treat them any differently.

**Challenge traditional norms.** You may need to consider your own beliefs and expectations about gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Do not expect them to conform to societal norms about gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation.
Assure and respect confidentiality. The person told you and may or may not be ready to tell others. Let them know that the conversation is confidential and that you won’t share the information with anyone else, unless they ask for your help. If they want others to know, doing it in their own way with their own timing is important.

Be prepared to give a referral. If there are questions you can’t answer, or if the person does need some emotional support, be prepared to refer them to a counselor, campus or community center, or a hotline.

Additional Tips When Someone Comes Out To You As Trans

Validate the person’s gender identity and gender expression. It is important to use the pronoun appropriate for the gender presented or that the person requests – this is showing respect. In other words, if someone tells you they identity as female, then refer to the person as “she;” if someone tells you they identify as male, then refer to the person as “he.” You can also use gender neutral language by referring to a person as “they.” Never use the word “it” when referring to a person; to do so is insulting and disrespectful.

Remember that gender identity and gender expression are separate from sexual orientation. Knowing someone is trans does not provide you with any information about their sexual orientation.

What Not To Say When Someone Comes Out To You

“I knew it!” This makes the disclosure about you and not the person, and you might have been making an assumption based on stereotypes.

“Are you sure?” “You’re just confused.” “It’s just a phase – it will pass.” This suggests that the person doesn’t know who they are.

“You just haven’t found a good woman yet” said to a male or “a good man” said to a female. This assumes that everyone is straight or should be.

“You can’t be gay – you’ve had relationships with people of the opposite sex.” This refers only to sexual behavior, while sexual orientation is about inner feelings.

“Shhh, don’t tell anyone.” This implies that there is something wrong and that being queer must be kept hidden.

Adapted from GLSEN
Professional Development and Training Manual, 2010
Steps to Become an Ally

- Challenge yourself. Lean into your discomfort.

- Educate yourself. Queer people should not always have to be “on point” and educate others.

- Create a visibly welcoming environment. Post signs, posters, books, etc. that indicate your willingness to be an ally.

- Create an inclusive curriculum.

- Use inclusive and gender neutral language.

- If you do not know what pronouns to use for someone, ask them. This is the most polite thing to do.

- Interrupt, confront, and react to oppressive language. Be prepared to create a learning opportunity (with classmates, co-workers, friends, family, etc.)

- Avoid controversial terms like homosexuality, lifestyle, preference, condition, choice to be gay, etc.

- Refer to campus/community resources.

- When you make mistakes, learn from them, clean them up, and move on.

- Be a role model for other allies.

Adapted from GLSEN
Professional Development and Training Manual, 2010
Q Terminology

Please read all terminology as refers to… That is: sexual identity refers to… Language is not exact and is always in motion.

Assigned Gender/Assigned Sex – the gender/sex one is socially considered to be at birth, due to the presence of one’s external sex organs.

Cisgender – a person identifying with or experiencing a gender the same as one’s assigned sex or that is affirmed by society; e.g., both male gendered and sexed.

Gender binary – A social classification that divides gender identity into masculine and feminine with expected gender roles, gender expressions, and characteristics for each one. The term also conveys the idea that there are only two genders; male/female or man/woman and that a person must be strictly gendered as either/or.

Gender cues – what human beings use to attempt to tell the gender/sex of another person. Examples include hairstyle, gait, vocal inflection, body shape, facial hair, etc. Cues vary by culture, class, geography, and historical time-period.

Genderqueer – someone who identifies as a gender other than "man" or "woman," or someone who identifies as neither, both, or some combination thereof. In relation to the gender binary (the view that there are only two genders), genderqueer people generally identify as more "both/and" or "neither/nor," rather than "either/or." Some genderqueer people see their identity as one of many different genders outside of man and woman, some see it as a term encompassing all gender identities outside of the gender binary, some believe it encompasses binary genders among others, some may identify as a-gender and some see it as a third gender in addition to the traditional two. The commonality is that all genderqueer people reject the notion that there are only two genders in the world. The term genderqueer is also occasionally used more broadly as an adjective to refer to people who are in some way gender-transgressive and could have any gender identity.

Gender Neutral Pronouns – For example, ze, hir, hirs, hirself, squi, squir, they/theirs – a way to refer to someone using words other than their name. There are many versions of gender non-specific pronouns currently in use.

Gender-variant Individual – a term is very similar in definition to genderqueer and is typically used to describe anyone that falls outside of the gender binary or typical male and female gender and sex demarcations.

Intersex – a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. For example, a
person might be born appearing to be female on the outside, but having mostly male-typical anatomy on the inside. Or a person may be born with genitals that seem to be in-between the usual male and female types—for example, a girl may be born with a noticeably large clitoris, or lacking a vaginal opening, or a boy may be born with a notably small penis, or with a scrotum that is divided so that it has formed more like labia. Or a person may be born with mosaic genetics, so that some of their cells have XX chromosomes and some of them have XY. Though we speak of intersex as an inborn condition, intersex anatomy doesn’t always show up at birth. Sometimes a person isn’t found to have intersex anatomy until they reach the age of puberty, or find out they are an infertile adult, or dies of old age and is autopsied. Some people live and die with intersex anatomy without anyone (including themselves) ever knowing.

**Passing** – this term is used in a multitude of ways; e.g. being able to not be perceived as glbtqi or queer; passing as a man (i.e. if trans or in drag); passing as a woman (i.e. if trans or in drag). Example sentence: When I at home with my family I totally pass as straight by changing how I dress, talk, and I never mention my personal life.

**Sex** – biology, including external genitalia, internal reproductive structures, chromosomes, hormone levels, and secondary sex characteristics such as breasts, facial and body hair, and fat distribution. These characteristics are objective in that they can be seen and measured (with appropriate technology). The scale consists not just of two categories (male and female) but is actually a continuum, with most people existing somewhere near one end or the other.

**Trans** – this is a shortened slang word used to refer to transgender and all the communities within that umbrella term.

**Transsexual** – feelings that one’s assigned sex does not reflect the gender they experience themselves to be. Individuals whose gender identity is different from their biological sex may seek surgeries or procedures (sex reassignment surgery, or gender affirmative surgeries and procedures) and hormone therapies to create a greater alignment between their sex and gender identity.

**Transgender** – an umbrella term encompassing anyone whose gender expression and/or gender identity differ from conventional expectations and constructs of an individual’s physical sex they were “given” at birth. This umbrella term is often used to describe a wide range of identities, experiences and communities.

**Transition** – term used to describe the process a person undergoes when changing their bodily appearance either to be more congruent with their gender identity or to be in harmony with their preferred gender expression. Can include social, medical, and legal steps that help the person achieve the greatest level of comfort with their body, gender, and social roles. These steps could include pronoun and name changes, gender expression changes, counseling, hormone therapy, various surgical procedures, and legal document changes (birth certificates, driver’s licenses, etc.). All of this is dependent upon the person, their resources, and often the laws of the state in which they reside.
**Transphobia** – hatred or fear of gender variance among people and gender variant expression

**Transman** – A male identified person who might identify as transgender or transsexual. Sometimes this identity label is adopted to affirm one’s history with another gender.

**FTM or F2M** – Individuals considered to be on the trans-masculine spectrum who are assigned female-at-birth. This is often short-hand for female-to-male.

**Transvestite** – primarily heterosexual men who cross-dress for sexual excitement. This word is being used less and less due to its association with the DSM IV and psychological disorders.

**Transwoman** – A female identified person who might identify as transgender or transsexual. Sometimes this identity label is adopted to affirm one’s history with another gender.

**MTF or M2F** – Individuals considered to be on the trans-feminine spectrum who are assigned male-at-birth. This is often short-hand for male-to-female.

**Two-Spirit** – A pan-Indian word that encompasses alternative sexuality, alternative gender, and an integration of Native Spirituality. This term also includes what dominant discourse refers to as transgender and transsexual. Different nations often have/had specific names for second and third gender categories. Two-spirit include gender variance and what US dominant discourse refers to as gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Two-spirit identity affirms the interrelatedness of all aspects of identity, including sexuality, gender, culture, community, and spirituality. That is, the sexuality of two-spirit people cannot be considered as separate from the rest of an individual's identity. Two-spirit connects American Indians to ancestry by offering a link that had previously been severed by government policies and actions.
National Queer Resources
(In Alphabetical Order)

- Asexuality Visibility and Education Network: www.asexuality.org/
- Bisexual Resource Center: www.biresource.net/
- FTM International: www.ftmi.org/
- Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD): www.glaad.org/
- Gender Education and Advocacy (GEA) - www.gender.org/
- The International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE): www.ifge.org/
- Intersex Society of North America (ISNA): www.isna.org/
- Lambda Legal: www.lambdalegal.org/
- National Center for Lesbian Rights: www.nclrights.org/
- National Center for Transgender Equality: www.transequality.org/
- National Consortium of Directors of LGBTQ Resources in Higher Education: www.lgbtcampus.org/
- National Gay and Lesbian Task Force: www.thetaskforce.org/
- National Transgender Advocacy Coalition (NTAC): www.ntac.org
- Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG): www.pflag.org/
- Point Foundation: www.pointfoundation.org/
- Safe Schools Coalition: www.safeschoolscoalition.org/

Washington State Queer Resources
(In Alphabetical Order)

- B-GLAD: Bisexual-Gay-Lesbian Adolescent Drop-in (Bellevue): www.youtheastsideservices.org/services/06_01_bglad.php
- GLOBE: GLBTQ Loving Ourselves, Becoming Empowered (Snohomish County): www.globeyouth.com/
- Ingersoll Gender Center: www.ingersollcenter.org/
- Lambert House (Seattle): www.lamberthouse.org/
- The Northwest Network: www.nwnetwork.org/
- Oasis Youth Center (Tacoma): www.oasisyouthcenter.org/
- Pride Foundation: www.pridefoundation.org/
- QLaw: www.q-law.org/
- Queer Youth Space (QYS): www.queeryouthspace.com/
- Seattle Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays: www.seattle-pflag.org/
- Stonewall Youth (Olympia): www.stonewallyouth.org/