

When you're ready to tell that first person about your sexual or gender identity – or even those first few people – give yourself time to prepare. Think through your options and make a deliberate plan of who, what, why, and how.

Remember that if you don't choose to come out now, or ever, your identity and experiences are still legitimate and valuable. You get to decide what is right for you.

Try asking yourself the following questions:

What signals are you getting?

You can get a sense of how accepting people will be by the things they say – or don't say – when LGBTQ-related issues come up. Try to bring them up yourself by talking about an LGBTQ-themed movie, TV character or news event. If a person's reactions are positive, chances are they will be more accepting of what you have to tell them.

Do you have accurate info?

The reactions of others will most likely be based on a lifetime of misinformation, and in some cases even negative portrayals of LGBTQ people and communities. If you've done some reading on the subject, you'll be prepared to answer their concerns and questions with reliable and accurate information.

Do you have support?

You don't have to do this alone. A support system is an invaluable place to turn to for reassurance. Sources of support can be other LGBTQ people, LGBTQ hotlines, school guidance counselors, your spiritual community, or, if you are coming out for the second or third time, perhaps the first person you opened up to initially. Also, if accessible, a supportive mental health professional can often help.

What it is you want to say?

Particularly at the beginning of the coming out process, many people are still answering tough questions for themselves and are not ready to identify with a certain label. That's okay. Maybe you just want to say you're attracted to someone of the same gender, or that you feel uncomfortable with the expectations of cultural "gender norms." Maybe you just want to say you're feeling your true gender does not align with the gender binary of male/female. Labels aren't important; your feelings are. You may want to try writing out what you want to say to help organize and express your thoughts clearly.

What are your best- and worst-case scenarios?

Thinking through what might happen when you come out to different people can help you be prepared. Could your housing or financial situations be affected? Make sure you have alternatives in place. What is the ideal reaction you're hoping for? Think about specific steps or actions that could help make it a reality.

Why now?

Timing can be very important. Be aware of the mood, priorities, stresses and problems of those to whom you would like to come out. Be aware that if they're dealing with their own major life concerns, they may not be able to respond constructively to yours.

Can you be patient?

Some people will need time to deal with this new information, just as it took time for many of us to come to terms with being LGBTQ. When you come out to others, be prepared to give them the time they need to adjust to what you've said. Rather than expect immediate understanding, try to establish an ongoing, caring dialogue.

Adapted from "Making a Coming Out Plan," University of California-Riverside LGBT Resource Center. www.out.ucr.edu.