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**COMING OUT**

Coming out is the process of acknowledging to oneself, and then disclosing to others, something that is not readily apparent or known about who we are. Coming out as transgender, non-binary, or however we identify, can often be a lengthy process. It can sometimes be messy or traumatic, but it may also be affirming and liberating as well. Deciding when and to whom to disclose should be up to you. The ways in which we choose to pursue these feelings, the steps we decide to take, or not take, and with whom we share our identities are as unique as we are.

## Coming Out To Ourselves

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The first person we typically come out to is ourselves. This process is individualized and we each undertake it in our own ways and in our own time. Processing a new realization about ourselves and our identities can be confusing, exciting, scary or surprising. Some of us have known we are trans or gender non-conforming since we were little. Others of us may not have realized until we were well into adulthood. Some of us may have realized when we were younger, but didn't feel able to express these feelings, or felt like we had to hide our identity from friends, family and loved ones.

No matter how or when we began to recognize our gender identities, coming out is an ever-evolving process. Our identity and sense of ourselves and our gender may change over time. Some of us may decide to change the names or pronouns we go by and not make any physical modifications to our bodies. Others may have decided to pursue medical and/or surgical procedures to affirm our gender identities. We may choose not to pursue any actions at all for numerous reasons. There is no one way to identify as transgender or non-binary. The important thing to remember is that it is your life and your identity to explore and define.

## What To Expect

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It is getting easier and easier to come out. More people know what transgender means and may even know another transgender person. At the same time, we need to take into account our current life circumstances. We may risk the loss of a job, family or housing. If that is the case, identifying some options before we come out can help us feel more in control. Having these conversations is the first step toward taking control of our own lives.

There are a range of reactions that people may have when someone comes out. People may respond with hostility, tolerance, acceptance or full support. The idea of someone they know changing their gender may be new or threatening to them. The information may be difficult to understand or fit into their worldview. This can be particularly true for those of us who are non-binary. Remember that initial reactions are very seldom the final reactions. If the initial reaction is not what you hoped for, leave hope and an open door behind you so the person knows you want them back if and when they are willing to learn more and grow.

It can be difficult to discuss feelings we have experienced, and perhaps hidden, with others. Relationships are built between two different people, so remember to leave space for the

person you are talking with to share their own feelings and their current state of knowledge about transgender people. This conversation can help you communicate how important the person is to you, and help you identify ways in which you can provide additional and/or more accurate information to them. Some of those closest to us will make mistakes and may refer to us by our old names and pronouns; realize that most people who misname/misgender us do not mean to hurt us. Letting others know that it hurts us when they use the wrong name/pronoun can help them to learn not to do it again, but try not to make them afraid to ever talk to you! Try to correct others in a calm and reasonable way. If you believe someone is intentionally using the incorrect pronoun or name, decide how much time and energy you wish to spend on them. It may ultimately be better for you to remove this individual from your life, even if the prospect of doing so seems difficult. Surround yourself with people who accept and respect you for who you are.

## Coming Up With A Plan

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How we come out to the people in our lives can be a complex process to navigate. Creating a plan can help us figure out the best way to disclose, and help us maintain control of the information about ourselves and our identity. It may be useful to make a list of our friends, family and acquaintances, and then decide how best to come out to each group or person. Some things you may want to consider when developing a plan include:

- Which friends/family know each other?
- What information are you comfortable with others knowing?
- Are any of your friends/family likely to share the information without your permission?
- Should you come out via email, phone or in-person?
- What do you want the outcome to be for your conversation with each person/group?

Do remember that although you may have preferences about with whom and how information is shared, once the information is out, you can no longer control it. Many people will feel the need to discuss your gender identity with others. It may be helpful to actually plan together with the person you are coming out to who it would be safest for them to talk to.

## Coming Out To Friends

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Our friends are often the people who know us best. They are also often the first people that we come out to. Fear of losing close relationships with people we may have known for years is one reason why coming out to our friends can often be difficult. It is important to realize that throughout our lives our friendships can change, shift or remain constant. The same is true when we decide to come out.

However, announcing a change in our gender can alter the nature of our friendships. The ways in which we relate, socialize and interact with our friends is sometimes based on their perception of our gender. As the perception of our gender changes, so may our friendships.

These changes may affirm our gender identities, but we may also grieve for the ways our friendships used to be. We may discover that the close friends we had previously do not remain as close. Many of the people we once felt closest to may end up distancing themselves, or leaving our lives altogether. We may discover that we are the one choosing to remove ourselves from relationships we once thought of as unshakable. We may also find that the friends we had before coming out continue to be our friends long after, and that some relationships actually become more intimate and supportive because of our honesty.

## Coming Out To Family

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If coming out to our friends can be a challenge, coming out our family can be even more complex. Our family members have likely known us our whole lives (or their whole lives), and coming out can throw their understanding of us and our families or relationships out of balance. It can be a big adjustment, even for those who are immediately accepting of our identities, to adapt to calling us by a new name or pronouns. Family members may have a hard time believing that our identity is real. They may express guilt that they did not recognize something so important was going on in our lives. They may believe that we are making rash decision about changing our gender. It is helpful to remember that while we likely have been thinking about and dealing with our gender identity for a long time, they are just beginning that process.

Because our families can affect so many aspects of our lives – such as where we live, our economic status, our partnership (if we're in one), or whether and how we parent children -- it is important to consider what may be at stake when coming out to family members. How have they reacted to you sharing other important news in the past? Our families, like our friends, may have positive or negative reactions to the news about our identities. In some instances, our families or certain family members may be unwilling to accept our genders. Some of those family members may decide to separate themselves from us. We may feel guilty or grieve for our losses, but seeking and building other support systems, adopting self-care practices and creating “chosen families” are all steps we can take to create supportive environments for ourselves.

## Coming Out to Partners or Spouses

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If we are in a relationship with a partner or spouse prior to coming out, our partner's reactions and feelings, as well as the potential consequences for our partner and our relationship, are common concerns. If you hope to keep the relationship, try to remember that any decisions one partner makes will affect the other. It isn't a healthy relationship if one partner just imposes changes the other person has no control over. Try to negotiate, together, how and when decisions are made. Taking your time and giving up some control are, experience shows, the best ways to end up with both the gender expression you want and the partner you want.

The ways in which a partner will respond to and process the news of our coming out will, of course, vary by individual. Many partners experience conflicting emotions when receiving news about our gender identity or the idea of transitioning. What sets this relationship apart from the others is that it will likely require adjustments to your partner's personal identity/sexual orientation as well as adjustments to their thinking about you.

If your partner sees themselves as either heterosexual or lesbian/gay, having a partner of another gender means they will have to find a new path for themselves. Will they continue to hold and/or put forth their own sexual orientation even though they now have a partner whose gender doesn't match that, or will they need to give up or change the identity they may have held for decades? Some partners of trans individuals find that their sexual or romantic desires do not align with our newly proclaimed identity. Just as others begin to perceive our gender differently, we may also begin to view our relationships in new ways. We may also find that our own desires change once we are expressing our gender identity.

Another issue may be finances, if you will be adding expenses to the household budget related to hormones, surgery, clothing, laser treatments, etc. The more the two of you are able to make decisions together, talk about the issues, and find your own support, the more likely it is that the relationship will not just survive, but strengthen.

Sharing who we are with the people closest to us may have consequences for the nature of our relationship. While coming out may ultimately mean that a relationship comes to a close, or that we and our partner(s) will need to devote time and intentional commitment to redefining our relationship together, being open about who we are and what we consider our gender to be can indeed strengthen that relationship.

Support for partners is available online. Here are two of the best-known:

- TransFamily Spouses  
<https://www.transfamily.org/discussion.html>
- Engender\_partners  
[https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/engender\\_partners/info](https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/engender_partners/info)

## Coming Out to Children

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It may seem overwhelming to consider the process of coming out to children, but talking to our own kids or to the children of our family or friends about who we are can be an empowering experience. Some people assume that discussing gender with children will affect the child's gender identity. This is untrue; children tend to be much more open-minded and accepting about the ways someone chooses to express their gender identity than adults are.

Younger children may express concern about a loss of stability or love, or what our identity means for them and the family. They may wonder if they will have a different gender identity as they get older. Let them know that our gender identity is independent of and will not affect their identity, and by all means, reaffirm your love and continuing support!

Adolescents are themselves in a period of transitioning from childhood to adulthood. It is a time in a young person's life where the need for peer approval is at its highest. Some teens may initially reject or be embarrassed by our identity, while others may be more accepting. Be straightforward and honest about your plans and make sure they understand when and with whom they can share this information. Let adolescents know that it is their choice whether to tell their friends, teachers or other people in their lives.

If we are coming out later in life, sharing with our adult children may be similar to coming out to other adults. Older children may need more time to process the news before they are ready and willing to talk. No matter what age the children in our lives are, acceptance of our new gender identity will be a process. Even if they are open to the news of us being trans or non-binary, they may still experience grief over the changes they perceive or simply fear. Whether they initially take the news well or not, coming out to our adult children provides an opportunity to create new relationships with them.

## **Additional Resources**

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Human Rights Campaign, Transgender Visibility: A Guide to Being You

<https://lgbtrc.usc.edu/files/2015/05/A-Guide-to-Being-You.pdf>

PFLAG, Coming Out As Trans

<https://lgbtrc.usc.edu/files/2015/05/Coming-Out-as-Trans.pdf>

PFLAG, Welcoming Our Trans Family & Friends

<https://lgbtrc.usc.edu/files/2015/05/Welcoming-Our-Trans-Family-and-Friends.pdf>

Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE) – trans inclusive

<https://www.colage.org/>