

Homo for the Holidays: Hints for Coming Out

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One of the hardest things that any queer person does is come out to his or her parents. Finding the right time and the right way to tell them is a difficult task that you must undergo. The process of coming out to your parents can be very difficult, and before you do decide to tell them that you are gay, lesbian or bi, you need to be prepared.

First of all, you need to be sure about your sexuality. If there is any doubt or confusion on your part, it is only going to make it harder on your parents and yourself. Also, you need to be comfortable with your sexuality, because any guilt or bouts of depression could take away from the energy that must be put into helping your parents. You need to have some kind of supportive group or friends that you can talk to about "coming out" issues and who can help you deal with any emotional problems that may arise. Find an appropriate time to come out. Make sure that there are not already numerous stressors in your family when you decide to come out; if there is a death in the family or unusual financial troubles, it can be harder on everyone. Be patient with your parents; the process can take months or years for them to deal with such new information.

Another concern that might influence coming out is whether or not you are financially dependent on your parents. If you are, perhaps you should delay telling them until you can gain more independence. Also, evaluate your parents moral and societal views about homosexuality. The more flexible they are, the easier it will be for them to work through it with you. Remember that every family is different, and you should note what kind of relationship you have with your parents before you decide to come out. And lastly - and most importantly - make sure that it is your choice to come out to your parents and not any one else's. If you are unsure if you want to or have severe doubts, you should probably wait to tell them until you feel more comfortable.

If you decide to tell your parents, you should be aware that they will likely go through several stages in handling this new information. The stages, which are similar to those one goes through when coping with death, are: *Shock*, *Denial*,

Guilt, *Expression of Feelings*, *Personal Decision-Making*, and *True Acceptance*. Remember that each family is unique, and although most will follow these aforementioned stages, you must allow for some latitude from your own parents. The first stage, *Shock*, can be anticipated if you suspect that your parents have no idea about your sexuality. It is a natural reaction that we all experience to avoid acute distress and unpleasantness and usually it wears off within a few days. Explain that you needed to tell them because you feel it is such a big part of your



life and that you need to be completely honest with them. Tell your parents you love them and that you are still the same person, because it has always been a part of you.

The next stage is *Denial*, which is characterized by hearing the message but building a defense mechanism to ward it off. Some common forms are: "No son (or daughter) of mine is going to be queer;" "That's nice dear, but what do you want for dinner;" "If you choose that lifestyle, I do not want to hear about it;" or "It's just a phase - you'll get over it." Their perception of your sexual orientation will be distorted by the views that they have learned from our homophobic society. Yelling or serene trances may occur, or, they may cry frequently. Only tell them what they ask of you and be

patient. Remember to ensure them that it is not a phase and it is normal for you even though it may not be considered normal by society.

The next stage that many parents transgress to is *Guilt*. A lot of people perceive homosexuality as a problem and thus feel the need to blame someone or something for it. Assure them that you do not see the cause as simple as them "failing you." Tell them that there are many theories, but the origins of homosexuality are not known. Find books or other information that they can read to help them cope. They may decide to talk to a close friend or a clergyman, but provide them with gay-friendly organizations or people whom they can talk to. The next stage, *Feelings Expressed*, describes a time when your parents find that guilt and self-incrimination are unproductive. They begin to listen and ask questions. Their feelings come out to you at this time, so be prepared to deal with it. Some common expressions are: "How can you hurt us this way;" "Please don't tell anyone in the family;" "I feel so alone and hurt - I think that I was better off not knowing;" or, "I wish I was dead." Anger and hurt are probably the most expressed feelings, but it is better for them to voice them instead of burying them. This is the first sign for a positive movement to acceptance.

The next stage, *Personal Decision-Making*, signifies that your parents are dealing with your sexuality more rationally. They may retreat for a while in order to decide how to react. There are three common kinds of decisions that your parents may make. Accepting the reality of your sexuality characterizes the first decision; they continue to love you and feel that your relationship with them has grown. The second decision that they might find is that your sexuality is an issue that they do not need to discuss. They can talk about it, but they are fragile in dealing with it. Your parents know their limits and don't wish to be pushed beyond them. Introduce them to your friends because meeting other queer people can help break down some stereotypes that they have as well as encourage them to discuss it more. Your sexuality can be the staging area for constant confrontation if your parents make the third decision. Your sexuality can invoke anger and cause problems at home.