

# When Someone Comes Out to You and Overcoming Initial Homophobia

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When someone shares with you that he or she is gay or has feelings for someone of the same sex, try to be aware of and/or remember that:

**1. Coming out is a serious decision.** The person is apt to have spent many hours in thoughtful preparation and shares the information with keen awareness of the possible risk.

**2. There is no way for the person to predict your reaction.** Do not assume that the person should have trusted you with the information sooner. You have spent your entire life in a society that teaches you to despise gay people. The person has no way of knowing in advance how well you will be able to throw off those years of training and respond to such an intimate offering of self.

**3. It is important to understand that the person has not changed.** You may be shocked by their revelation, but remember this is still the same person as before. Don't let the shock lead you to view the person as suddenly different or bad. You now know that this person can love someone of the same sex. You have no reason to believe suddenly that this person is morally depraved or emotionally unbalanced.

**4. Don't ask questions that would have been considered rude within the relationship before this disclosure.** This person has the same sensibilities as before. However, you may well need to do some "catching up." Some common questions are:

1. How long have you known you were gay?
2. Is there someone special?
3. Has it been hard for you carrying this secret?
4. Is there some way I can help?
5. Have I ever offended you unknowingly?

Be honest and open about your feelings. It makes the sharing more complete and makes change possible. If you find it hard to believe, say so. If you find you are reacting with emotional distaste but want to learn more so you can overcome your prejudice, say so. If your feelings are totally negative, you can say that too. It is a possibility that the gay person has certainly considered and risked. But in fairness, admit aloud that negative feelings may change so the gay person will leave the door open for you to return if you are able to get past your ingrained prejudice.

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You may well be tempted to break the bond you have with this gay person. Though he or she has not changed, the information now confronts you and your homophobic cultural teachings. A conflict may be inevitable. Just as some people develop specific phobias (heights, snakes, deep water, etc.), many people take in the anti-gay messages of the culture and develop homophobia. It is a disability like any other phobia. You can get help with it through psychotherapy, provided the therapist does not share your phobia.

But just as the person who is phobic about deep water may be unaware of anything more than a discomfort with and avoidance of oceans, lakes and rivers, the homophobe may be aware of discomfort in the presence of gay people and the desire to avoid them. If you are prone to homophobia, you will be strongly tempted to rid yourself of this previously valued friendship by quick rupture or (if that includes too much guilt in you) by a slow undermining of the relationship.

If you see the symptoms of homophobia and want help, try to find a gay-oriented psychotherapist. Don't risk unknowingly working with a counselor who shares your homophobia. If you destroy the relationship, chances are the gay person will be hurt, but will survive, having been preparing through life for such a reaction on your part.

If your homophobia is of the very mild variety (like the person who can take the elevator up twenty stories but does not want to visit the tallest building in the city), you can get help from reading and from making social contacts with more gay people. Prejudice thrives on the lack of contradictory information. Integration destroys stereotypes. The more gay people you meet, the better the chances of ridding yourself of mild homophobia.

If you know or suspect that someone you know is gay and you have not yet been told, appreciate the fear and anxiety that inhabits the disclosure. All you can do, usually, is to make it openly known that you appreciate and support gay people. Actions speak louder than words, however. Gay friends and gay-oriented reading materials in your home do more than announcements of pro-gay feelings, which may not sound sincere.