TIPS FOR WORKING WITH CLIENTS WHO ARE COMING OUT

- Exploring strategies such as the right time, place, circumstance and whom to include can be a great way for a counsellor or health professional to help coming out or disclosure.
- Questions of risk and individual safety are of critical importance when talking with someone about their coming out or disclosure intentions. Some people may be very concerned about the options they have if it all goes wrong, whereas other people may not have considered negative outcomes and contingencies at all. Building a sense of informed choice about who to come out to, whom not to come out to and why can be a valuable way to explore the choices people have about their own coming out.
- Consideration of disclosure as a potential loss of control of information is something to think about before any coming out process. While it's possible to ask that people do not disclose personal information without permission, this is not always possible to ensure. For example, once a disclosure about sexuality, gender history and/or current gender identity has been made by a young LGBT person to a small group of people in a school setting, this information often quickly becomes known by the school population as a whole and this may have unintended impacts on a person's privacy and efficacy.
- When a person comes out, invites in or discloses, they have usually been exploring this aspect of themselves for quite some time. It is often useful to remind clients that it may take others a while to adjust their perception of that person and that this process is not about rejection but rather, about seeing the person anew.
- Coming out or disclosure is rarely a casual conversation, and it's important to respect the moment as important when a client invites you into this space. Helping clients structure and choose the right pace of their coming out or disclosure to others can introduce a layer of careful deliberation and safety if required.
- Some professional situations demand discretion about sexualities, relationships and gender identities. Whether this enforced discretion is positive or not is an ongoing tension and something that may need exploration as part of the coming out process.
- It is vital that counsellors realise that many people consider trans an experience or aspect of their past that may not be "who they are". Some trans people have also found that disclosure of their gender history detracts from others' ability to understand and respect who they are now.

LGBTI National LGBTI Health Alliance

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COMING OUT, INVITING IN & DISCLOSURE

A QLIFE GUIDE FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

'Coming out' typically refers to acknowledging one's sexuality or same-gender attractions to oneself and disclosing this to others.

COMING OUT, INVITING IN & DISCLOSURE

Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people often go through an internal process of questioning and discovering their sexuality before disclosing to others.

Ideas around coming out can be particularly problematic for bisexual people who are often treated like they have one foot in and one foot out of the closet and are critiqued for a perceived inability to "make up their mind". People who are bisexual are increasingly adopting a version of coming out that validates their identity as bisexual people.

Although coming out language is often used in the context of trans people, they often have a different experience which may be best described as 'disclosure'. Most trans people affirm a gender that is independent from the one they were assigned at birth, rather than coming out as trans. Although many trans people identify as heterosexual, managing disclosure can be complex for trans people who are also lesbian, gay or bisexual.

The concept of coming out should generally not be applied to people with intersex physical characteristics, as they often discover their intersex characteristics from parents or medical providers rather than being in the position of making the initial disclosure.

Coming out/disclosure can be a complex, fluid and multidimensional process that is revisited at various times in people's lives, with associated changes in identity over time. It is rarely a simple or singular process for anyone and is considered by many to be a lifelong process.

For some individuals, there is stress and anxiety associated with coming to terms with one's sexuality or with affirming a gender identity publicly for the first time. People can be afraid of the potential impact of associated life changes, including the potential for experiences of discrimination or violence.

Research shows that the majority of first suicide attempts by LGBT people are made prior to disclosing their sexuality or affirming a new gender to others. Often the fears of a worst-case scenario are diminished after disclosure/coming out, particularly when acceptance is experienced.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF 'COMING OUT'

Coming out is itself shorthand for "Coming Out of the Closet", a phrase coined in the 1960's, when public discussions of sexuality began to open up views of private lives. It was here that a wider discussion around sexuality as an identity rather than just sexual behaviour began to occur.

Coming out took on particular importance in the 1970s and 1980s with the rise of the gay and lesbian liberation movements in many countries, including Australia. With the growth of a public, politicised lesbian and gay movement, coming out became a strategy for visibility and pride. It also provided a way to include people who were not yet out in the liberation process. Although initially excluded from lesbian and gay activism, bisexual liberation movements also raised awareness of bisexuality among heterosexual, lesbian and gay people.

INVITING IN

Recently, the concept of 'inviting in' has grown to challenge the existing idea of coming out. It is felt that inviting in is a more positive frame. Rather than coming out of a secret world, inviting in can be viewed as a loving and trusting process of inviting important people into one's inner world. It is also inclusive of a process whereby newly identified LGB people are welcomed in by others already living an openly LGB life.

HOW DIFFICULT IS COMING OUT/INVITING IN?

It is widely assumed that all people are heterosexual until proven otherwise. This is known as heteronormativity. Thus, for many LGB people situations that require coming out can be both a daily and ongoing process. LGB people may only be out in some contexts and keep private their sexuality for fear of discrimination or abuse in others. In an effort to keep themselves safe, some LGB people may not acknowledge having a same-gender partner, change the gender of one's partner when speaking about one's relationship or describe their partner as a friend. Having to constantly come out and be aware of safety can leave LGB people feeling isolated, hyper-vigilant and invalidated. In a society that assumes a person is heterosexual and identifies with their assigned gender, coming out /inviting in is not usually an easy process.

'Rather than coming out of a secret world, inviting in can be viewed as a loving and trusting process of inviting important people into one's inner world. It is also inclusive of a process whereby newly identified LGB people are welcomed in by others already living an openly LGB life.'

The constant need to manage disclosure can be a source of stress for trans people, given the levels of discrimination and violence trans people often experience. One in five trans Australians have been threatened with non-consensual disclosure of their trans history or experience. Due to high rates of discrimination, including physical violence and refusal of employment or housing, on the basis of being perceived by others as trans, threats of disclosure have significant physical risks and psychological and practical impact.

LGBT people who come from families of particular cultural or religious traditions where being LGBT is much less accepted may wish to avoid being cut off from their families and tradition by avoiding a more public coming out declaration. For many people who do disclose, serious breakdowns in family and cultural relationships can occur and require the rebuilding of support networks independent of family.

There are people who have grown up in very supportive environments and have not experienced their sexuality or gender experience as a particularly problematic issue. Some LGB people say: "I never came out, because I was never in". We are seeing each generation of people become more accepting of people who are LGBTI.

EACH EXPERIENCE OF COMING OUT OR DISCLOSURE IS UNIQUE

Although there may be some common themes or pathways, individual stories heard in the counselling room or health settings are uniquely formed narratives. One of the problems with the emergence of very public narratives of coming out is that LGB people may feel further isolated if their coming out story does not conform to a publically celebrated model or if they don't come out or disclose much at all.

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