

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Coming out at work

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people (LGBTQ), “coming out” is the term we use to refer to the process of revealing our sexual orientation or gender identity for the first time. Far from being a one-time rite of passage or overnight change, coming out is something LGBTQ people must do over and over again; to their friends, their families and indeed almost every time they encounter a new person, group, or situation. It is a process that is different for everyone – some people come out to everyone in their lives immediately, others take their time and still others choose never to come out to certain people or groups. One thing that coming out has in common for most LGBTQ people is that it is not always easy and is indeed often laced with anxiety and fear of being ostracized and/or excluded.

The workplace is a particularly public and challenging environment in which to come out because it is quite literally the place where our livelihoods are on the line. It is also difficult to avoid, as the divide between our “work lives” and “personal lives” is, in many ways, a fiction. At work we discuss our families and even bring our partners to holiday parties.

If coming out at work feels stressful or scary for you or someone you know, here are some strategies to consider and ideas to keep in mind to make coming out a bit easier.

Look for your workplace’s discrimination policy

Most workplaces have an anti-discrimination policy in place that should cover sexual orientation and gender identity. Familiarizing yourself with this can take some of the stress away, not necessarily all of it. Unfortunately, as official policies don’t necessarily prevent day-to-day discrimination.

Are other people out in your workplace?

Listen to your colleagues talk about their personal lives and you may notice that there are other LGBTQ people who speak openly about their identities already. This is a great opener and you can start by speaking to one of them about coming out and how they experienced it. It’s also a good indicator that you will be met with acceptance should you choose to come out.

Test the waters

If you are worried about how people will react or if you don’t want to immediately put your personal life on display, start by talking about LGBTQ movies, current events and news items. This is a great way to gauge peoples’ reactions and get a sense of how tolerant your workplace is.

Start small by telling one trusted person

Even if you cannot identify other LGBTQ people right away, perhaps you have made a friend at work who you feel comfortable enough with to divulge your identity to. Starting with one person is likely to be less frightening than telling everyone at once.

There are many ways to come out

You need not make a big announcement – you can do things like place a picture of you and your partner on your desk put a gay-pride related sticker or sign in your office, have your partner pick you up or casually mention them in conversation.

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Though the visibility of LGBTQ people has increased and has gained more formal rights, discrimination still exists and it is possible that you will meet some people who unfortunately are prejudiced against your identity. If this becomes a problem, speak to a counselor and/or to management about your concerns.

Though coming out may seem daunting at times, being open about who you are can be rewarding and it can also ease the stress and extra energy you're expending hiding it, which will allow you to focus on your work as well as your friendships at work.