



**Parents, Families, Friends, and Allies  
United with LGBT People to  
*move equality forward!***

## **Questions and Answers**

**For Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender people  
...and their family and friends**

### **Finding Out A Loved One is LGBT**

Your first reaction to learning that your loved one is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning can range anywhere from anger to sadness, fear to hurt, confusion to grief, and anywhere and everything in between. These emotions and the thousands of others that parents, families, and friends experience as they navigate their loved ones coming out process are normal.

We can tell you with absolute certainty that you're not alone. According to statistics, one in every ten people in this country and around the world is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). Approximately one in four families has an immediate family member who is LGBT, and most people have at least one LGBT individual in their extended circle of friends and family.

**PFLAG is here for you.** Our members are parents, families and friends of LGBT people and LGBT people themselves. We have been through much of what you are now feeling. **We understand.**

The first thing you should do for yourself and your loved one is to talk to someone who has been through this process. Whether it is by e-mail, phone or in-person at a PFLAG meeting listening to and talking to those who have experienced the feelings you are encountering can be both cathartic and comforting. PFLAG has more than 400 chapters and representatives across the country ready and willing to work with families and friends both in meeting and in a one on one basis.

The second thing you should do is educate yourself. Below you will find resources specific to family and friends of the LGBT community. All of these are available for free. But please also [consider joining PFLAG](#). As a member of PFLAG, you are entitled to support, education, and advocacy materials whose focus are helping you help you and your child or a loved one.

## **The Coming Out Process**

For lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, the coming out process can be both difficult and liberating. Our members -- parents, family members, friends and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community -- understand the coming out journey and we offer our support and unconditional love to people at any point in their journey.

For most people it takes time to know who you are and it's okay to be confused, or to be uncertain about whether (or how) you should come out. **Remember: you are not alone.** There are people out there with the same questions and concerns that you have. And there are people who have already found their own answers. **PFLAG is here to help you.**

Every day in communities large and small across the country, PFLAG is working to help keep families together. PFLAG support group meetings provide a safe space for LGBT and questioning people to share their feelings and experiences, to explore their identity, and to seek the acceptance and unconditional love that our members have to offer. PFLAG has chapters in almost 400 communities, and most of them have helplines, websites and/or e-mail services you may contact at your convenience.

## **Questions & Answers**

### ***How can I get support after a LGBT loved one has come out to me?***

PFLAG offers [local support](#) and [education](#) all across the country. Members in PFLAG chapters know what you're going through and can help. You may be experiencing an array of emotions such as grief, guilt, and denial, and you could be facing new questions about your relationship with your LGBT loved one. Whatever your reaction, remember that your loved one is sharing one part of his/her identity with you and is ultimately the same person as yesterday.

### ***How are sexual orientation and gender identity determined?***

No one knows exactly how sexual orientation and gender identity determined. However, experts agree that it is a complicated matter of genetics, biology, psychological and social factors. For most people, sexual orientation and gender identity are shaped at any early age. While research has not determined a cause, homosexuality and gender variance are not the result of any one factor like parenting or past experiences. It is never anyone's "fault" if they or their loved one grows up to be LGBT.

If you are asking yourself why you or your loved one is LGBT, consider asking yourself another question: Why ask why? Does your response to an LGBT person depend on knowing why they are LGBT? Regardless of cause, LGBT people deserve equal rights and to be treated fairly.

***Is there something wrong with being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender?***

No. There have been people in all cultures and times throughout human history who have identified themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). Homosexuality is not an illness or a disorder, a fact that is agreed upon by both the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association. Homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association in 1974. Being transgender or gender variant is not a disorder either. Being LGBT is as much a human variation as being left-handed - a person's sexual orientation and gender identity are just another piece of who they are. There is nothing wrong with being LGBT - in fact, there's a lot to celebrate.

Discriminatory laws, policies and attitudes that persist in our schools, workplaces, places of worship and larger communities however are wrong and hurt LGBT people and their loved ones. PFLAG works to make sure that LGBT people have full civil rights and can live openly, free from discrimination and violence.

***Can gay people change their sexual orientation or gender identity?***

No – and efforts to do so aren't just unnecessary – they're damaging.

Religious and secular organizations do sponsor campaigns and studies claiming that LGBT people can change their sexual orientation or gender identity because there is something wrong. PFLAG believes that it is our anti-LGBT attitudes, laws and policies that need to change, not our LGBT loved ones.

These studies and campaigns suggesting that LGBT people can change are based on ideological biases and not peer-reviewed solid science. No studies show proven long-term changes in gay or transgender people, and many reported changes are based solely on behavior and not a person's actual self-identity. The American Psychological Association has stated that scientific evidence shows that reparative therapy (therapy which claims to change LGBT people) does not work and that it can do more harm than good.

***How does someone know they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender?***

Some people say that they have "felt different" or knew they were attracted to people of the same sex from the time they were very young. Some transgender people talk about feeling from an early age that their gender identity did not match parental and social expectations. Others do not figure out their sexual orientation or gender identity until they are adolescents or adults. Often it can take a while for people to put a label to their feelings, or people's feelings may change over time.

Understanding our sexuality and gender can be a lifelong process, and people shouldn't worry about labeling themselves right away. However, with positive images of LGBT people more readily available, it is becoming easier for people to identify their feelings and come out at earlier ages. People don't have to be sexually active to know their sexual orientation - feelings and emotions are as much a part of one's identity. The short answer is that you'll know when you know.

***Should I talk to a loved one about his or her sexual orientation or gender identity before the person talks to me?***

It's seldom appropriate to ask a person, "Are you gay?" Your perception of another person's sexual orientation (gay or straight) or gender identity (male or female) is not necessarily what it appears.

No one can know for sure unless the person has actually declared that they are gay, straight, bisexual, or transgender. PFLAG recommends creating a safe space by showing your support of LGBT issues on a non-personal level. For example, take an interest in openly discussing and learning about topics such as same-sex marriage or LGBT rights in the workplace. Learn about LGBT communities and culture. Come out as an ally, regardless of if your friend or loved one is LGBT.

Read PFLAG's [\*\*Dos and Don'ts for Friends and Families\*\*](#) to get some tips should the "coming out day" happen. Your ultimate goal is to provide a safe space for your loved one to approach you when he or she is ready without fear of negative consequences.

### ***How do I come out to my family and friends?***

There are many questions to consider before coming out. Are you comfortable with your sexuality and gender identity/expression? Do you have support? Can you be patient? What kind of views do your friends and family have about homosexuality and gender variance? Are you financially dependent on your family? Make sure you have thought your decision through, have a plan and supportive people you can turn to. Just as you needed to experience different stages of acceptance for yourself, family and loved ones may will need to go through a similar process.

PFLAG was founded because of the unconditional love of parents for their gay children. Your loved ones will need time to adjust to your news, the same way you may have needed time to come to terms with yourself. However, true acceptance is possible and happens every day, especially with education and support.

### ***Why do people "come out"?***

Coming out is a way for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people to live their lives openly and honestly. Hiding one's sexual orientation or gender identity can be very stressful, lonely and isolative. Coming out is an affirming way for GLBT people to connect with others in vibrant and diverse GLBT communities. GLBT people come out because staying "in the closet" keeps the important people in their lives from knowing about a big part of their identity. Coming out can be a difficult decision, because many GLBT people fear rejection from their families, friends, employers and religious institutions. It is important to turn to supportive people for advice, and to have a plan if a person has reason to fear how their parents, employers, classmates or teachers will respond to them coming out. PFLAG can help.

For many, the stress of keeping a secret from the people they are close to ultimately outweighs the fear of losing acceptance and love. Coming out is an important decision that people should be able to make on their own terms – when they want to, to whom they want to.

Today's youth face more social pressures than ever, especially since young people are coming out at increasingly younger ages. That's why PFLAG created [\*\*Be Yourself: Questions and Answers for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth\*\*](#) a coming-out guide which provides a supportive approach to common questions asked by teens who may be questioning their sexual orientation. It also provides hotline numbers for teens and a list of resources. Also consider talking to someone from your local [\*\*PFLAG chapter\*\*](#) for more personalized tips and support.

***Can gay people have families?***

Yes! LGBT people can and do have families. Same-sex couples do form committed and loving relationships. In the United States many same-sex couples choose to celebrate their love with commitment ceremonies or civil unions, although these couples are not offered the rights and benefits of marriage. More and more LGBT couples are also raising children together, although state laws on adoption and foster parenting vary. And of course, many LGBT people have the support of the loving families they were born into, or the families that they have created with their other friends and loved ones. As the saying goes, all it takes is love to make a family.

***How can I reconcile my or my loved one's sexual orientation with my faith?***

This is a difficult question for many people. Learning that a loved one is LGBT can be a challenge if you feel it is at odds with your faith tradition. However, being LGBT does not impact a person's ability to be moral and spiritual any more than being heterosexual does. Many LGBT people are religious and active in their own faith communities. It is up to you to explore, question and make choices in order to reconcile religion with homosexuality and gender variance. For some this means working for change within their faith community, and for others it means leaving it.

PFLAG offers a number of resources in this area, including our [Welcoming Faith Communities project](#) and our publication, [Faith in Our Families](#).

***Why should I support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality?***

LGBT rights are not special rights. PFLAG works to achieve equal civil rights for all people, including our LGBT loved ones. Our LGBT children, friends and family members deserve the same rights as our straight ones. However, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is still legal in many states, a LGBT person can be fired from their job simply because of who they love or how they express their gender, same-sex couples cannot legally be married in the majority of states in the United States, LGBT youth face constant harassment and abuse in schools across the country, and it is clear that the road to full equality and acceptance is a long one.

**Because of all of these realities, PFLAG needs you to stand up and join us in our work to move equality forward.**

Your loved one needs you to take a stand for fairness. By being open about yourself and your family you are already helping to dispel misinformation and fear. [You can take the next step by joining PFLAG as we support, educate and advocate for a better world.](#)