

Coming Out

Coming Out – refers to the process of recognizing and accepting one’s sexual orientation, gender expression, and/or gender identity. It is also used to refer to the act of disclosing one’s sexual orientation, gender expression, and/or identity to others. Also known or referred to as “coming out of the closet”. Coming out is a never ending process because it continues each time a person interacts with new people.

There are several theoretical models commonly used to illustrate the “coming out” process for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (see references listed at end of this document).

In brief, these models hypothesize that people go through a process of awareness of being different from society’s expectation of heterosexuality (awareness). They begin to explore same-sex attractions and seek out information about LGB communities (confusion/exploration). The next general phase is an identification with the LGB communities and a personal &/or social identity as LGB (acceptance). A person’s identity as LGB might conflict with other aspects of their identity (e.g., racial/ethnic, religious, political affiliation) and necessitate a resolution of this conflict. Finally, a person’s LGB identity is integrated with other aspects of identity to form a holistic self-concept or identity (synthesis). The graphic below shows where each of the general phases occur (awareness, confusion/exploration, acceptance, synthesis) in these most often cited models.

Similarities Among Models	Cass (1979)	Sophie (1986)	Troiden (1989)	McCarn & Fassinger (1996)
Awareness of Difference	Identity Confusion	Awareness	Sensitization	Awareness
Confusion/Exploration	Identity Comparison	Testing & Exploration	Identity Confusion	Exploration
	Identity Tolerance			
Acceptance of LGB Identity	Identity Acceptance	Identity Acceptance	Identity Assumption	Commitment
	Identity Pride			
Synthesis of LGB Identity	Identity Synthesis	Identity Integration	Commitment	Internalization

There are not currently any identity development models that attempt to talk about identity development with respect to gender identity or gender expression. Some people adapt these models to talk about the coming out process for transgender individuals but there is no scholarly research or models that have addressed identity development with respect to transgender identities.

References

- Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4, 219-235.
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- Troiden, R. R. (1988). Homosexual identity development. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, 9, 105-113.
- McCarn, S. R., & Fassinger, R. E. (1996). Revisioning sexual minority identity formation: A new model of lesbian identity and its implications for counseling and research. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 24, 508-534.