

## Gay and Lesbian Identity Development Model

*COMING OUT is a life-long process of exploring one's sexual orientation and Gay/Lesbian identity and sharing it with family, friends, co-workers and the world. It is one of the most significant developmental processes in the lives of LGBT people. Coming Out is about recognising, accepting, expressing and sharing ones' sexual orientation with oneself and others.*

### **Stage 1: Identity Confusion**

This is the "Who am I?" stage associated with the feeling that one is different from peers, accompanied by a growing sense of personal alienation. The person begins to be conscious of same-sex feelings or behaviors and to label them as such. It is rare at this stage for the person to disclose inner turmoil to others.

### **Stage 2: Identity Comparison**

This is the rationalisation or bargaining stage where the person thinks, "I may be gay, but then again I may be bisexual," "Maybe this is just temporary," or, "My feelings of attraction are simply for this one person, but its nothing more." There is a heightened sense of not belonging anywhere with the corresponding feeling that "I am the only one in the world like this."

### **Stage 3: Identity Tolerance**

In this "I probably am gay" stage, the person begins to contact other LGBT people to counteract feelings of isolation and alienation, but merely tolerates rather than fully accepts a gay or lesbian identity. The feeling of not belonging with heterosexuals becomes stronger.

Positive contacts can have the effect of making other gay and lesbian people appear more significant and more positive to the person at this stage, leading to a more favorable sense of self and a greater commitment to a homosexual self-identity.

### **Stage 4: "Identity Acceptance"**

There is continued and increased contact with other gay and/or lesbian people in this stage, where friendships start to form. The individual thus evaluates other lesbian and gay people more positively and accepts rather than merely tolerates a lesbian or gay self-image. The earlier questions of "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?" have been answered.

Coping strategies for handling incongruity at this stage include continuing to pass as heterosexual, and limiting contacts with heterosexuals who threaten to increase incongruity (e.g. some family members and/or peers). The person can also selectively disclose a homosexual identity to significant heterosexuals.

### **Stage 5: "Identity Pride"**

This is the "These are my people" stage where the individual develops an awareness of the enormous incongruity that exists between the person's increasingly positive concept of self as lesbian or gay and an awareness of society's rejection of this orientation. The person feels anger at heterosexuals and devalues many of their institutions (e.g. marriage, gender-role structures, etc.) The person discloses her or his identity to more and more people and wishes to be immersed in the gay or lesbian subculture consuming its literature, art, and other forms of culture. For some at this stage, the combination of anger and pride energizes the person into action against perceived homophobia producing an "activist."

### **Stage 6: "Identity Synthesis"**

The intense anger at heterosexuals -- the "them and us" attitude that may be evident in stage 5 -- softens at this stage to reflect a recognition that some heterosexuals are supportive and can be trusted. However, those who are not supportive are further devalued. There remains some anger at the ways that lesbians and gays are treated in this society, but this is less intense. The person retains a deep sense of pride but now comes to perceive less of a dichotomy between the heterosexual and gay and lesbian communities. A lesbian or gay identity becomes an integral and integrated aspect of the individual's complete personality structure.