

Coming Out

Coming out is a continuous event. As we meet people, navigate new environments, or shift our own identities, we face decisions about how, when, and if we choose to share personal information. Being “out” doesn’t necessarily make someone *more* LGBTQ or *more* courageous than folks who are less often read as, or announce, their LGBTQ identities. There is no single way to look queer, transgender, or nonbinary. Keeping our identities to ourselves *and* making ourselves visible can both be courageous acts of self-love and care. The goal of this resource is not to convince anyone that they should or should not come out at a given time, but rather to help make sure that those choices are informed decisions, whatever they may be.

Things to consider

- ❑ **Who’s in your support system?** Your support system is a network of people whom you trust, and who are supportive of you. They don’t necessarily have to be friends—they can include professors, mentors, advisors, counselors, family members, or kind acquaintances. Consider making a list of all your supports, putting stars next to those you know you can call if you need help. It’s okay to only have one, two, or even zero people right now. The hotline numbers at the end of this resource are great additions to any list—know that there is *always* someone who will listen and support you.
- ❑ **Requesting Backup.** If you’re planning on coming out to new people—or are concerned you might be outed—let someone in your support system know what’s going on and ask if they can be available to talk later that day. Setting up a time to meet afterwards or video chat is a great safety net. It can also be helpful to have a support person physically with you for moral support and/or to help advocate and explain what your identity means. Be sure to have a discussion beforehand about what role you’d like your support person to serve—Do you want them to help with 101 explanations? Correct people if they use a deadname or wrong pronouns? Be a silent support and let you do all the talking? If nobody is available to be backup, have a place in mind to visit afterwards where you’ll feel comfortable.
- ❑ **What signals are you getting?** If you’re planning on coming out to someone, think about how they’ve reacted to LGBTQ people in the past. Have they ever commented or reacted to an LGBTQ celebrity or scenes in movies/shows? Do they seem aware of current LGBTQ issues and politics? Timing also makes a difference. There may never be a *perfect* time, but finding a time when the other person seems relaxed can help them be more open.
- ❑ **Safety.** Your physical and emotional safety is a priority—sometimes it makes sense to be stealthy instead of being out for one’s own protection. Prioritizing your safety is often the most courageous choice you can make. If you’re concerned that your safety will be threatened by coming out—and you still want to come out—consider ways you can come out without putting your physical body at risk. Phone calls, video calls, written letters, and text messages are all options!
- ❑ **Financial reliance.** If you’re concerned that you may lose your family’s financial support, research your available options in case that happens. Meet with your campus’ financial aid office and ask what options would be available to you, and whether your financial aid package would be adjusted. It can be extremely helpful to have an advisor or mentor with you during this meeting for support and help taking conversation notes. Also consider how this may affect your housing, food security, access to medication, health insurance, and travel. Your campus’ office of student support services is a great resource for finding options and solutions.

- Securing a place to stay.** If you feel unsafe or uncomfortable living with your current roommate(s), explain the situation to your campus' residence life office. While simply saying that you feel unsafe should be enough, it often helps to provide concrete examples of moments when your roommate(s) have created hostile environments. Be able to provide a description of the event(s), when it happened, and if anyone else witnessed it. A supportive RA would also be a great person to bring with you into this meeting.

If you do not feel safe or comfortable at home, many campuses will allow students to stay on campus over extended breaks. Also consider reaching out to your support system for additional housing options. If you need a place to stay for several weeks, be honest about your needs so you can prepare additional accommodations for yourself if your support person cannot house you for the entire time. It's okay to ask for help—this is the power of community and showing up for each other.
- Anticipate questions.** Some people may be surprised or in disbelief when others come out to them. This sometimes leads to uncomfortable and confrontational questions. Be prepared to answer questions and respond to common misconceptions or stereotypes the other person might have. If your coming out involves talking about medical transition, being able to provide scientific research studies often helps alleviate the anxieties others may have about your safety. Remember that this is just the *beginning* of a conversation. If the other person is having a hard time digesting all the new information, or if their questions overwhelm you, you can offer to send them some videos and articles, and then follow up with a time to talk again later. There's a wealth of articles, essays, films, videos, and *allies* that can do a lot of the explanatory work. Be sure to already have a few prepared.
- Reserve patience.** Acceptance and education might not happen all at once. Be prepared for people to need time in order to process the new information. This does not mean that you have to stick around while someone else works through their own biases to accept you, especially if the process is harmful to you! Not everyone will be open and accepting of LGBTQ people, but a less-than-ideal—or even hurtful—initial reaction doesn't necessarily mean that the person will not work to grow and learn. They may just need time.
- What does support look like to you?** Take time to think about specific acts of support that would be helpful. It's okay to ask for specific kinds of support from people! Should the person use a different name, pronoun set, and language to talk about you? Do you want them to share your identity with some people, and not others? Do you need extra support around certain family members? Is it helpful for folks to send you a text every week checking in?
- Remember:** You are the only person who can decide if coming out in a given situation is the right call. There is strength in every decision. Your identity is your own!

Helplines | In an emergency, call 911 for immediate help.

Iowa Victim Service Call Center (24/7)
800-770-1650 or text 'IOWAHELP' to 20121
Trevor Project Lifeline (24/7)
866-488-7386

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (24/7)
800-273-8255 or online chat available
800-799-4889 for deaf and low-hearing
Trans Lifeline (9am-3am CST)
877-565-8860



Questions about this resource?
Email campus@iowsafeschools.org

