Guide to coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual to your straight partner or spouse

You may be struggling with your sexual orientation or identity. You may want to come out to your spouse or partner in a caring way, but you are afraid your disclosure will change everything. You may be feeling a great deal of guilt and fear right now. Perhaps you have already come out to your Straight Partner but are looking for guidance on what to expect going forward. We understand.

OurPath, which assists Straight Partners and Partners of Trans People after discovery or disclosure of their partner's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or other non-heterosexual (LGBT+) identity, affirms that all LGBT+ people deserve to live authentic lives. According to the Pew Research Center, for LGBT+ people, "realizing their sexual orientation or gender identity and sharing that information with family and friends is often a gradual process that can unfold over a series of years." When LGBT+ people are married or otherwise committed to Straight Partners, how they come out to their Straight Partners matters.

The Human Rights Council's resources for coming out include articles on coming out at work, coming out to your parents, friends, doctors and extended family. Sadly, there are no resources listed for coming out to your Straight Partner or spouse.

This guide seeks to fill that void. OurPath has compiled this guide based upon years of listening to Straight Partners share what helped (and what hurt) when their LGBT+ partners came out. This guide also includes input from LGBT+ partners who came out to their Straight Partners. Although this guide focuses on the Straight Partner's experience, this guide does not invalidate the LGBT+ partner's experience. The perspectives of the Straight Partner and the LGBT+ partner often coexist.

OurPath hopes you can use this guide when you come out to your Straight Partner. When you come out in a way that is compassionate toward your Straight Partner and better understand your Straight Partner's possible response, you help pave the way for a better transition for your entire family.

As you take steps toward living an authentic life that aligns with your identity and orientation, you allow your partner/spouse to have a chance to live authentically as well. Part of this process is being responsible for the consequences of behaviors you may have exhibited and decisions you have made as part of an inauthentic life, including any harm they may have caused to your partner/spouse or children. This guide will help you find integrity and responsibility in the coming out to your partner/spouse process. Your new, authentic life begins here and now.

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STRAIGHT PARTNER QUOTES

Here are a few comments from Straight Partners who had positive things to say about the way their LGBT+ Partner handled their coming out:

> "I'm grateful my husband came out to me before he told anyone else. I would have felt very foolish had I been the last to know."—*Mikala (Straight Partner)*

> "My wife apologized for cheating on me, and for hiding who she was for so many years. It made it easier for me to forgive the years I lost."—*Ryan (Straight Partner)*

> "I'm glad he didn't ask our kids to keep secrets for him. That would have harmed the kids."—*Tonya (Straight Partner)*

> "I'm so glad I got disclosure. That's much better than finding out by accident, or worse, more denial."—*Mark (Straight Partner)*

> "She was considered but decisive and did not string me along where there was no hope. She assumed responsibility for the changes that needed to happen, especially being clear with the kids and the family about why."—*Richard (Straight Partner)*

> "He told me everything and did not leave anything out. As painful as it was, he answered all my questions honestly. After three years we are in a good place."—*Soraya (Straight Partner)*

> "I appreciated that he didn't move in with his boyfriend or announce their relationship on Facebook right away. It gave me time to adjust."—*Emily (Straight Partner)*

> "Once he came out, he let me tell anyone I felt I needed or wanted to tell for my own sanity. He understood I was in deep pain and I had a "side" in the story too."—*Latoya (Straight Partner)*

> "My wife came out to me before she acted on it. I'm grateful for that. She released me to find love with a straight woman, something I had never known before."—*Javon (Straight Partner)*

> "He gave me full disclosure. He was compassionate during his disclosure and even did research and told me about OurPath. Because of how he handled coming out, I had a base that helped me to learn to begin to trust him again."—*Amy (Straight Partner)*

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PLANNING YOUR COMING OUT

You are doing the right thing by coming out, telling the truth, and taking a step toward living your authentic life. In doing so, you are also allowing your partner to begin their process of living a more authentic life. Discerning and coming to terms with your sexuality has likely been a long process, and you don't have to have all of the answers right now. However, sharing what you do know with your Straight Partner provides a good starting point for your discussion.

Many LGBT+ Partners agonize over how to tell their Straight Partners the truth, fearing they will hurt them. But secrecy and deception are far more destructive, especially if you have children with your Straight Partner. When, where and how you come out to your Straight Partner can lay the groundwork for a more respectful, less traumatic transition to your family's future, whether you stay together or not.

- **STI Testing:** If there has been infidelity, get fully tested for all STIs. When you disclose infidelity, also disclose your test results. Your Straight Partner deserves the full truth and any pertinent medical information that may impact their health. Encourage your Straight Partner to get tested, even if you believe you are "all clear."
- **When to Come Out:** Avoid coming out to your partner during holidays, birthdays, anniversaries or vacations to prevent your Straight Partner from having negative associations with those days in the future.
- **Where to Come Out:** Choose a private location (unless physical violence is a possibility). Straight Partner reactions vary widely. Disclosing in a public place (such as a restaurant) deprives your partner of the dignity of their honest emotional reaction.
- **The Setting:** Create free time for you and your Straight Partner, such as a Friday after work. Arrange for the kids and other family members to stay elsewhere. Leave the time open for you and your partner to talk, cry, sleep, yell and grieve.
- **Holding Space:** It will not be easy, but "hold space" for your partner's reaction. Intense emotions such as anger and even rage are normal. In and of themselves, these emotions do not constitute abuse or homophobia/biphobia. Do your best to be present for your partner's emotional response, but do not remain in a situation where physical harm may occur.
- **Your Straight Partner is NOT Your Enemy:** Your partner may not have been the perfect spouse, partner or parent. Or, they may have been wonderful at all those things. But that's not what this is about. This situation is about a mismatch of sexual orientations,

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which is not their fault, especially if they didn't know. Do your best to show compassion, empathy, and respect for your Straight Partner. Remember, this person wanted to share their life with you; they may be the mother or father to your children. They deserve to be treated with respect in this process.

- **Your Grievances in the Relationship:** Resist the urge to point out your partner's flaws. This is not the moment to air a list of your grievances or to tell them they weren't the best partner. Those grievances are irrelevant to your sexualities, whether those sexualities make you fundamentally compatible as a couple, or whether infidelity occurred. Often, that list of grievances is a reflection of the underlying lack of sexual compatibility that had existed in the relationship. If you decide to continue as a couple, you can address those issues separately.

- **Your Truth:** Tell your partner the truth. Commit to honest, vulnerable, empathetic conversation. Avoid gaslighting, script-flipping, deflection, half-truths, evasions, and equivocation, which erode trust, add to your partner's confusion and betrayal, and damage your partner's psychological well-being. A partner can usually tell when you are lying, deflecting, giving non-answers to legitimate questions or skirting issues. Telling only what you think is "necessary," either to protect your Straight Partner's feelings or to protect yourself from their reaction, only prolongs the healing process. Additionally, if you have children and will need to co-parent them, building a new relationship based on honesty with your Straight Partner will be the best way to move forward for you, your Straight Partner and your children.

- **Intimate Details:** It is critical to tell your partner the full truth about your identity, orientation and any secret relationships or deceptive behavior. Graphic details, however, can exacerbate any trauma the Straight Partner may already be experiencing. Discuss with your Straight Partner how much they really want to know about these activities and whether some details (such as specific sexual behaviors) would actually be more harmful to your Straight Partner to hear.

- **Take a Break:** You can walk away from the conversation and come back to it if you or your partner need to do so. This process did not happen overnight—disclosure to your partner will have its own timeline, too.

- **Validate Your Partner's Feelings:** This disclosure may be traumatic for your spouse or partner, as well as your children. Acknowledge and validate your partner's feelings verbally. For example, "I understand you're feeling angry / upset / betrayed, etc., because of what I'm sharing. I know I have hurt you deeply with this information." Refrain from continuing with a "but" statement or justification for this disclosure.

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- **Responsibility:** Take responsibility for the pain this is causing, even if you didn't intend for it to happen this way. You are not at fault for who you are, but you are responsible for how you have behaved, including any secrecy, deception or withholding of essential information. Even if you believe there are legitimate reasons for your choice to live in the closet, your partner and children are likely unaware they have been in the closet with you, and it is likely they will experience pain as their reality is upended. No one likes to be blamed, but blame and responsibility are not the same thing. Taking responsibility is empowering and goes a long way toward your partner's healing, as well as your own.

- **Apologies:** People are responsible for their decisions and the resulting consequences. Infidelity, lying, deflecting, gaslighting, denial, and blame-shifting all harm your partner's psychological well-being. They undermine your partner's ability to trust themselves, their intuition and their own reality. You are accountable for your behavior and the impact it has had on your partner, regardless of any justifications for it. You may find that apologizing for any hurtful behaviors is as healing for you as it is for your partner to hear.

- **Whom to Come Out to First:** Respect your partner enough to tell them first (with the exception of a therapist, counselor, spiritual leader or trusted confidant who can support you during this process). Your partner has the right to know material information about their own primary relationship before anyone else, including any children, family or friends. Telling others outside the relationship could lead to a deeper sense of betrayal for the Straight Partner.

- **What if My Partner Has Already Discovered the Truth?:** Some Straight Partners discover dating apps, messages, e-mails, pornography, receipts, club membership cards, sex toys, even video evidence in the form of "sex tapes." These discoveries may confirm long held suspicions or intuitions. Or they may come as a total shock and in one instant, your partner's reality is completely shattered. If they confront you, this is not the time to double down on lies and deception. This is not the time to deflect and blame them for "snooping." This is not the time to become self-protective, lie, gaslight and script-flip. This is the time to be honest. This is the time to let go of those old ways of coping, which are harmful to LGBT+ Partners as well, in favor of complete candor. If you focus on helping your partner by being honest and forthcoming, you are in the unique position to minimize harm and also empower and engage them. This is the time to take full responsibility for your life, including your closet. In short, this is the time to really live what it means to be an authentic human being.

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HOW YOUR PARTNER MAY RESPOND TO YOUR DISCLOSURE

Be prepared for a wide range of possible responses. Be prepared for difficult or challenging emotions, questions and uncomfortable accusations. Be prepared for this conversation to unfold over time, morph, and even repeat as your Straight Partner questions their reality, processes the news, and determines what this means for their past and their future.

- **Difficult Emotions:** Shock, anger, confusion, betrayal, rage, sadness, grief and depression are common reactions to disclosure of a partner's LGBT+ status. Some Straight Partners even have intense physical responses such as shaking, nausea, or even vomiting. Some Straight Partners may initially react with more concern for their LGBT+ Partner and forget to care for themselves, and their emotions surface later. These emotions may evolve, intensify, lessen and resurface again repeatedly over an extended period of time, even years. Many Straight Partners show symptoms consistent with Complex-PTSD and Relationship Betrayal Trauma. Their reality has been upended. Their past is not what they believed, and their future is now in question. They are just beginning to process this fundamental change to your relationship, whereas you have likely already had months or years to process your sexuality and identity. Leave space for your partner to take their time to recover. It takes a long time to reconstruct and cognitively integrate a new narrative of the relationship in light of this new information. Bottom line: this can be a deeply disorienting experience. We encourage individual counseling as much as possible.
- **Challenging Questions:** Your partner may have a lot of questions. Common questions include:
    - How long have you been questioning your sexuality?
    - How long have you known you were LGBT+?
    - Did you lie to me about who you are?
    - Why didn't you tell me sooner? Have you been lying for the entire relationship?
    - Why couldn't you trust me with this?
    - Why did you marry me/commit to me?
    - Did you use me as a "beard"?
    - Did you use me to create a perception of yourself as straight?
    - Did you use me for children?

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- Did you ever really love me?
- Was our marriage/partnership a fraud?

Answer truthfully and do your best to deliver hard truths with compassion. If you've known for a while, or suspected, or dealt with confusing feelings from the time you were an adolescent, tell your partner. If you are still grappling with your sexuality or identity, say so. Your honesty is crucial to healing for you both. Some couples report more intimacy post disclosure, because it is the most honest communication they have had during their entire relationship.

- **Duration of Partnership and Age of Coming Out:** When a marriage or partnership is of significant duration, it can be particularly difficult for a Straight Partner to cope with their partner coming out. Not only do they have a sense of losing their past (an entire life and marriage was not what it seemed to be), but they also have a sense of losing their future (dreams of retirement and relaxing in the golden years and playing with grandkids go up in smoke). The financial considerations of late-in-life divorce may mean Straight Partners have to return to work just when they were hoping to retire. In addition, many face emotional and logistical barriers to dating again in later life and may feel there are no more chances for them to find authentic love and partnership in their remaining years. This can cause tremendous psychological distress. If you are coming out after decades of partnership, be especially sensitive to the remarkable changes this may mean for your Straight Partner—both for the life they have already lived and the life they anticipated.
- **What if I Was Unfaithful?:** If there has been infidelity, it is possible your partner will experience it as a relationship betrayal trauma, just as they would if you had had sex with an opposite sex partner. Many LGBT+ partners view their infidelity as sexual experimentation or discovery to confirm their own sexual identity. Although it's possible, your Straight Partner is not likely to understand your infidelity that way. They may experience rage, betrayal and grief. They will need to process not only your behavior (infidelity), but also the discovery that you are not the person they thought you were (sexual identity). Thus, it is a complex betrayal leading to a complex recovery.
- **Bisexuality:** Refrain from telling your partner you are bisexual unless you genuinely believe yourself to be bisexual or are sincerely questioning. Some LGBT+ partners initially come out as bisexual in order to "soften the blow" to their Straight Partners. This often gives the Straight Partners false hope that the relationship is salvageable, setting up an even bigger betrayal if you later come out as lesbian or gay. Falsely claiming bisexuality contributes to bi-erasure of people who are actually bisexual.

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- **Other Sexual Identities:** As you are discovering or uncovering your own sexual identity, you may experiment with adopting and rejecting various identities and labels. Pansexual, sexually fluid, queer, hetero-flexible are just a few of the many sexual identities and labels that LGBT+ Partners may explore. Know that the period of your sexual discovery is often a period of insecurity and confusion for your Straight Partner. They are not sure if you will arrive at a sexual identity that includes or excludes them as your partner. Mutual compassion for how your sexual exploration impacts both partners will help you navigate this uncertain time.

- **Complex Trauma:** Your partner may question if you ever really loved them. They may question their memories of your family life, reliving those memories on a loop, wondering if you were lying to them at important moments. Many LGBT+ Partners insist they did love their Straight Partners, but it was often a platonic love. Your partner might be angry because they did not know your love was platonic instead of sexual or romantic. The discovery can be experienced as a deep betrayal that impacts the way a Straight Partner perceives their own desirability for years to come.

- **Damaged Trust:** Many Straight Partners grapple with severely damaged trust in themselves and others as the result of disclosure or discovery. They experience cognitive dissonance trying to reconcile the version of you they thought they knew and the real you they are just learning about. Telling the truth about the nature, depth and duration of your feelings will help them recover their ability to trust what future relationship partners share about themselves. This ability to trust is essential for your Straight Partner's ability to have healthy relationships going forward.

- **Rewriting History:** Straight Partners often report feeling as though years of their lives were "stolen". They might be angered or enraged by this sudden re-writing of their own life history. They might feel they were used to provide children or to project a certain public image for the LGBT+ Partner. They may wonder if the person they thought they married ever really existed. These feelings are difficult and must be validated and answered with care, even if these things were never your intention. Again, therapy can help navigate these difficult feelings.

- **Coping with Sexual Rejection and Neglect:** Depending on the nature of your sexual relationship, there may be deep wounds to your partner's own sexual identity. They may have questioned their desirability and worthiness of love if sex or physical affection were infrequent or fraught. Some closeted LGBT+ Partners avoid sexual contact by telling their Straight Partners they are unattractive, even repellant, in order to avoid sexual contact. This is a severely harmful form of emotional and sexual abuse. Many

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Straight Partners, male and female alike, carry deep scars from sexual rejection long after their relationships with their LGBT+ Partners end.

- **What if Our Sex Life Was Decent?:** On the contrary, if your sexual relationship was adequate, satisfactory or even robust, this may result in a different kind of confusion for your Straight Partner. They may wonder how your sex life could have functioned at all if you are lesbian or gay. Be prepared to discuss your authentic experience of your sex life to help your Straight Partner understand how sex functioned for you in the relationship.

YOU'VE COME OUT TO YOUR PARTNER. NOW WHAT?

The good news is that it's possible for you to work through this together as a couple and a family. Emotions may run high for some time. Release the pressure to have the answers or make any long-term decisions during the moment of disclosure, or the days and weeks afterward.

Each individual will need to process disclosure in their own way and determine how it impacts their desires for the relationship going forward.

- **Immediate Separation/Divorce?:** Sometimes both partners quickly agree that the marriage or partnership cannot continue. Sometimes the LGBT+ Partner wants to divorce immediately, and the Straight Partner insists the couple can still "make it work." Other times, the Straight Partner wants out right away, and the LGBT+ Partner wants to keep the family together.
- **Make it Work?:** Sometimes both partners want to see if they can make a Mixed Orientation Relationship (MOR) work. Cultural and family values play a role in these decisions, as do financial considerations, living arrangements, relationship boundaries and community consequences. Honest communication will be key to making a MOR in any form successful.
- **Fluid Situation:** Whatever your immediate situation, your relationship dynamics will change as you both process the disclosure. As your situation evolves, decisions may change. This is normal. Stay open and communicate honestly about changes in feelings and desires.
- **Renewed Intimacy:** Some couples do go through a "honeymoon" period initiated by the increased honesty and intimacy of disclosure. Straight Partners in this situation report that the disclosure conversation was "the most honest we've been with each other in years." This may lead to a renewed sexual interest between the couple. If this is the

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case with you and your partner, be honest with each other about any prior sexual liaisons outside the marriage, agree to STI testing together, and use safe sex practices such as latex condoms until everyone's health is assured.

- **Telling Others:** Discuss with your partner whom (in addition to a therapist or counselor) they will tell about your LGBT+ status so they are able to receive support. Telling a few select people is not the same as "outing," a malicious practice designed solely to harm people who identify as LGBT+. During this time, your partner has a right to receive (and will likely need) emotional support from family, friends and professionals.
- **Monogamy or Open Relationship?:** Some Mixed Orientation Couples choose to stay together, either in monogamous relationships or relationships open to outside sexual partners. Researching open relationships models and Ethical Non Monogamy (ENM) can help you decide which option is right for you and what, if any, rules you need to put in place around sex and dating outside the relationship.
    - **Opening a relationship should not be used as a pretext to conduct an affair already in progress.** Sexual relationships that start as affairs before the marriage was opened by mutual consent add a layer of complication and potential betrayal for the Straight Partner. Mutually establishing and then adhering to boundaries and ground rules is essential. Open relationships require deep honesty, integrity, effort and vulnerability to be successful.
    - Straight Partners may agree to experiment with opening a relationship, only to discover that monogamy is more authentic to their own relationship style and sexuality. Negotiation and renegotiation, mutual respect and consideration are essential to find a relationship model that is both authentic and fulfilling to both the Straight Partner and the LGBT+ Partner.

THE IMPACT OF COMING OUT PUBLICLY ON YOUR STRAIGHT PARTNER

Public responses to your coming out may vary widely depending on the community and culture where you live. In more socially progressive communities, you may receive praise and congratulations upon coming out, but in more socially conservative communities, the LGBT+ Partner may be criticized, shunned or excommunicated. Even as you deal with the public reaction to your coming out, your Straight Partner will be met with a different, but equally challenging public reaction to your coming out.

- **Public Response:** Your Straight Partner may receive a lot of questions from curious

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people once you come out publicly. One of the most common questions is, "How could you not know your spouse/partner was gay/lesbian/bi?" The implication of this question is that the Straight Partner is somehow naïve, ignorant, or blind. Many people do not appreciate that LGBT+ people do not fit neatly into overt gay stereotypes. That said, the Straight Partner may indeed wonder how they missed signs (if signs existed) or why they denied their intuition, and they may grapple privately with humiliation and shame over this. They may feel like they have been a fool or a dupe, even if you never intended to dupe your partner. This is why public scrutiny compounds the embarrassment your Straight Partner may be feeling. Assure your partner that responsibility for disclosure was always yours. It was never your Straight Partner's responsibility to guess or put the clues together, and they need to know they have not failed.

- **Praise and Congratulations:** If your community is congratulating you for coming out and living authentically, watching you receive this public congratulations and support might be very difficult for your Straight Partner. They're seeing people celebrate something that might have a devastating impact on their lives. Seeing you congratulated and told you are brave for living authentically is a reminder to your partner that they were part of your "inauthentic" life, which can feel extremely hurtful. It may cause feelings of resentment and anger. If your Straight Partner is not able to celebrate your coming out with you, this is likely the reason why.

- **Homophobia and Biphobia:** Straight Partners are often uncomfortable publicly expressing normal, valid anger or rage because those emotions could be mistaken as homophobia/biphobia. This has a silencing effect on Straight Partners. Expressing anger over behavior is not the same as expressing anger over identity. Also, being angry with an individual's spouse or partner does not translate as homophobia. Indeed, many Straight Partners are and remain strong LGBT+ allies post disclosure. Anger at their own spouse or partner does not mean they do not support or empathize with LGBT+ people in general. In cases where a Straight Partner expresses homophobic views, this must be teased apart from their anger over the situation or their partner's behavior.

- **Isolation:** People are often uncomfortable around Straight Partners. They don't know what to say to or how to treat Straight Partners. It can be difficult balancing joy for the LGBT+ Partner coming out and empathy for the Straight Partner who is left behind. This leads to Straight Partners being treated like an afterthought or being ignored altogether. You are the best advocate for your Straight Partner. While you're coming out and experiencing a new life that is exciting and scary for you, understand that the Straight Partner will be facing a much different, scary time.

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- **New Relationships:** If you move on with a new partner, especially quickly after the ending of your relationship, it may be difficult for your Straight Partner. While you may have been grappling with your sexual orientation for months or years, they have only just found out. While you have had a long time to process your sexual orientation or identity, they haven't. You may have already grieved the loss of your relationship, while they have only just begun to do so. Be kind and understanding.

- **New Personas:** Your Straight Partner is trying to reconcile the person they thought you were with who you are now, which can be highly traumatic. You may be changing your appearance, your friends, your hobbies, interests and your lifestyle. You may now appear to be living life unfettered (even if the reality is rockier for you), while your Straight Partner is feeling devastated, abandoned and traumatized. It may be disappointing that your partner cannot be happy for your new changes, but they need the opportunity to grieve the relationship they thought they were in.

- **Moving On:** Sometimes the Straight Partner is an uncomfortable reminder of the LGBT+ Partner's inauthentic life. The LGBT+ Partner is eager to put that chapter of life behind them. Being "a painful reminder" to an LGBT+ Partner can itself be a painful reminder that the relationship the Straight Partner thought they were in was not an authentic one. Many Straight Partners report feeling discarded very quickly after disclosure. This only amplifies feelings that the partnership was not real or a fraud. It takes time to heal from feeling this way. Understand that healing might take years.

- **Grieving Together:** Your Straight Partner may be wondering why you don't seem to be grieving as they are. They may wonder if they ever mattered to you at all if you move on quickly. Not being able to grieve with you is another loss for your Straight Partner. Again, you are your partner's best advocate during this time, and with kindness and help through this process, they can be yours as well.

- **"Gay Adolescence":** Researcher Vivienne Cass identified six stages of coming out in her 1979 paper on Homosexual Identity Formation. In stage 4, Identity Acceptance, and stage 5, Identity Pride, a newly out individual is often experimenting with their LGBT+ identity, new behaviors, new people, and new experiences. There may be a sense of freedom and relief after so many years in the closet. The new world may seem scary, but exciting at the same time. This period of experimentation is colloquially known as a "gay adolescence," but people of any age can go through it. While this phase can be difficult and confusing for your Straight Partner to witness, (they are trying to reconcile who they knew you to be before you came out with who you are now), it is especially important to be mindful of children. With so many new people to meet and experiences

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to have, Straight Partners repeatedly report children getting left behind and neglected. Do your best to provide as much stability and consistency for your children even while you are exploring your new identity and communities.

COMING OUT TO THE KIDS

Kids often do adjust well to having an LGBT+ parent, provided they still feel loved and secure, and they are given open, honest, age-appropriate information and space to express their feelings, and both of their parents work toward a healthy and honest relationship. Adjustment can be positively supported if both parents let their children know they are loved and a main priority. Often, the earlier children learn about an LGBT+ parent, the better they adjust.

- **Coming Out to Kids:** Avoid bringing children into the closet with you. Anyone who has carried the burdens of the closet should never wish it on anyone else, especially their loved ones. Not muzzling the family, especially young children, may mean the LGBT+ Partner will be "outed" in short order. Word can spread in schools, to professional colleagues or community members before the LGBT+ Partner and the Straight Partner are ready, so plan accordingly. Religious affiliations will undoubtedly complicate this, and extra care and planning will be essential. The impact on both partners' employment may also need to be assessed. Remember that in the long run, the whole family benefits from the truth, including the LGBT+ Partner.

- **Processing the News:** Kids have their own processing time and methods. For you and your partner/spouse, this is a life changing event. For the kids, this is a life defining event. Kids need security, love and consistency to process the news and the changes. Allow the kids to have their feelings and express themselves and validate those feelings. Give your kids as much stability and love as you and your partner are able to.

- **Whole Family Approach:** The emotional processes of both parents affect the kids. Take a whole family approach to mental health support and processing, where everyone getting healthy support is also best for each individual in the family. Make your kids' well-being a priority, and that means making your Straight Partner's wellbeing a priority as well as your own. How you treat your partner - their other parent - matters to the kids. If they see you and your partner working together, respecting each other, and caring about each other, that will go a long way toward your children's adjustment as family dynamics change.

- **Disclosure:** How disclosure is handled may impact your children's own self-worth, future relationships, and many aspects of their lives. You will often hear that "kids

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are resilient." While this is true, it is not permission to assume that your children will bounce back healthily no matter what you do or how you behave once you are out of the closet. Coming out is a whole family experience. Answer any of your children's questions in honest, age-appropriate ways with as much information as you and your partner are prepared to disclose.

- **Discovery:** If your children discover something that points to your LGBT+ identity, speak with your partner about it first, even if this involves disclosure, and decide together how to talk to your child about what they've seen or heard.
- **Family Secrets:** Family secrets are toxic to children and families. Children can usually tell when there is something being hidden in the family, and that pattern of secrecy and mistrust stays with them consciously and unconsciously, having negative impacts upon their own relationships in the future.
- **Making Your Child Your 'Secret Keeper':** Sometimes kids discover something (on their parent's phone or computer perhaps) that points to an affair or to their parent having a different sexuality than assumed. If your children discover something about your LGBT+ identity, never make your child or children your secret keeper. They should never be in a position of knowing more about your LGBT+ identity than their other parent or siblings. This is damaging to the child's psyche and may have profound negative consequences that can follow them into their adult lives and relationships.
- **LGBT+ Children:** Keep in mind that your children may be LGBT+ themselves. In some cases, LGBT+ children have had difficulty coming out themselves because the process of a parent coming out was full of angst, fighting, and acrimony between their parents. Do your best to avoid creating a negative environment for your entire family during the coming out process. The healthier the transition the entire family has, the easier it is on all the kids, LGBT+ or not.
- **Introducing New Partners:** Both the LGBT+ Partner and the Straight Partner need to be mindful when introducing new partners to your children. Whether it's the Straight Partner who begins dating right away, or the newly-out LGBT+ person going through what's colloquially known as a "gay adolescence," kids may find themselves being introduced to several new adults in quick succession. Sometimes they may be confused or resentful of these new adults, sometimes they can get attached to them. This is difficult for the kids if those new adults are not around for long. Consider waiting for a reasonable period (many experts suggest dating for at least six months) before introducing your children to a new adult. This increases the likelihood those adults will be a more stable influence in your children's lives.

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- **Overnight Guests:** Establish ground rules with your Straight Partner for when and how any new adults will be allowed to spend the night in the family home. Children are often uncomfortable with new adults spending the night in the house, indeed, in bed with Mom or Dad. These encounters can impact the children in negative ways and undermine their sense of safety and security in their own home. Co-parenting and frequent consultation is more essential than ever to allow the kids time to transition too so they can gradually ease into their parents' new lives.

OurPath hopes you are able to use this guide to aid your family in transitioning to a more authentic life for all of you. And we hope that your Straight Partner will find greater authenticity in their own lives, now that you have disclosed this important part of your identity that impacts you both.

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