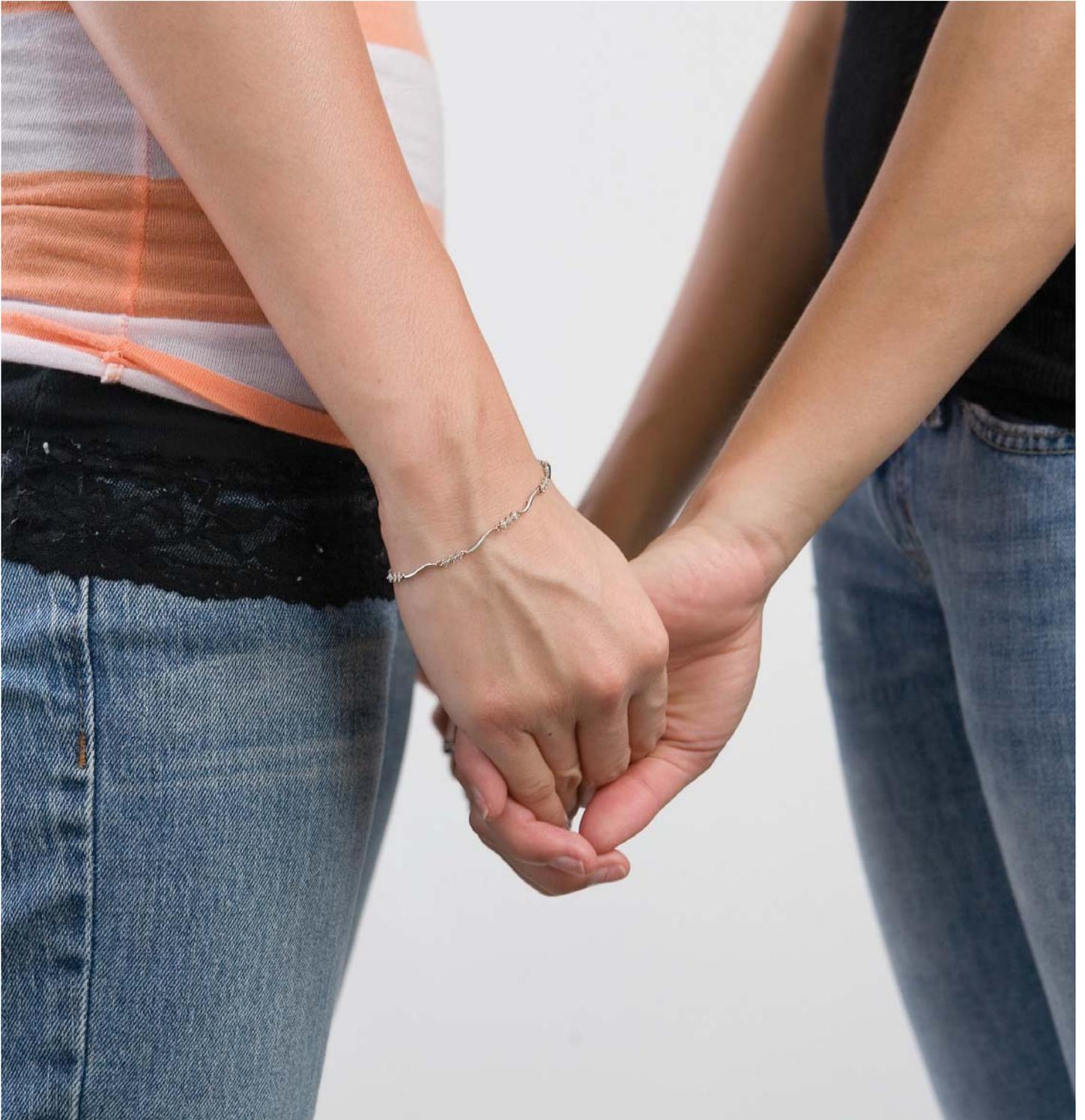


THE PROCESS OF COMING OUT

SEXUAL VIOLENCE & INDIVIDUALS WHO IDENTIFY AS LGBTQ



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THE PROCESS OF COMING OUT

SEXUAL VIOLENCE & INDIVIDUALS WHO IDENTIFY AS LGBTQ

Coming out is the process that some individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) experience as they tell themselves, family, friends, and society about their sexual orientation or gender identity. For individuals who identify as LGBTQ, the coming out process can be both difficult and liberating.

The coming out process is different for everyone. Whether lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, when coming out, individuals face a unique set of issues based on personal circumstances – including age, location, familial status, class, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and countless other factors (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2006). Regardless of how someone identifies, a common factor is that each person makes a deeply personal decision about to whom, if anyone, they can confide in about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Most people come out because they reach a point where they are no longer emotionally willing or able to hide such an integral part of who they are

(HRC, 2006). Coming out is an act of bravery, authenticity, and openness (HRC, 2006).

The coming out process can be both difficult and freeing (Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays [PFLAG], 2009). It is up to each individual to decide who to confide in, when and how to do it – even if someone is living openly, there may be times when coming out may not be necessary or safe (HRC, 2006).

Throughout the coming out process, it's typical for a person to feel:

- Scared
- Confused
- Vulnerable
- Empowered

- Exhilarated
- Relieved
- Proud
- Uncertain
- Brave
- Affirmed

There are opportunities and risks to coming out that are unique to each individual. Some common advantages and risks as noted by the Human Rights Campaign (2006) follow:



Opportunities associated with coming out

- Developing closer, perhaps more genuine, relationships.
- Building self-esteem from being known and loved for their true selves.
- Reducing the stress of hiding an integral part of their identity.
- Connecting with others who identify as LGBTQ.
- Being part of a strong and vibrant community.
- Helping to break down barriers, myths, and stereotypes about people who identify as LGBTQ.
- Becoming a role model for others.
- Helping youth who identify as LGBTQ feel comfortable about coming out.

Risks of coming out

- Not everyone will be affirming or accepting.
- Family, friends or coworkers may be shocked, confused or even hostile.
- Some relationships may permanently change.
- Some people may experience harassment or discrimination.
- Some young people, especially those under age 18, may be thrown out of their homes or lose financial support from parents.

According to the Human Rights Campaign (2006), there is a coming out continuum with three stages that people move through. For each person it is a little different and people may move between phases. These phases can also happen at different stages of life, for example someone who is out to friends and

family may not choose to be out at work or school.

Stage 1: Coming out to self

A beginning period, when individuals ask themselves questions, moving toward coming out to themselves and perhaps the decision to tell others.

Stage 2: Coming out to others

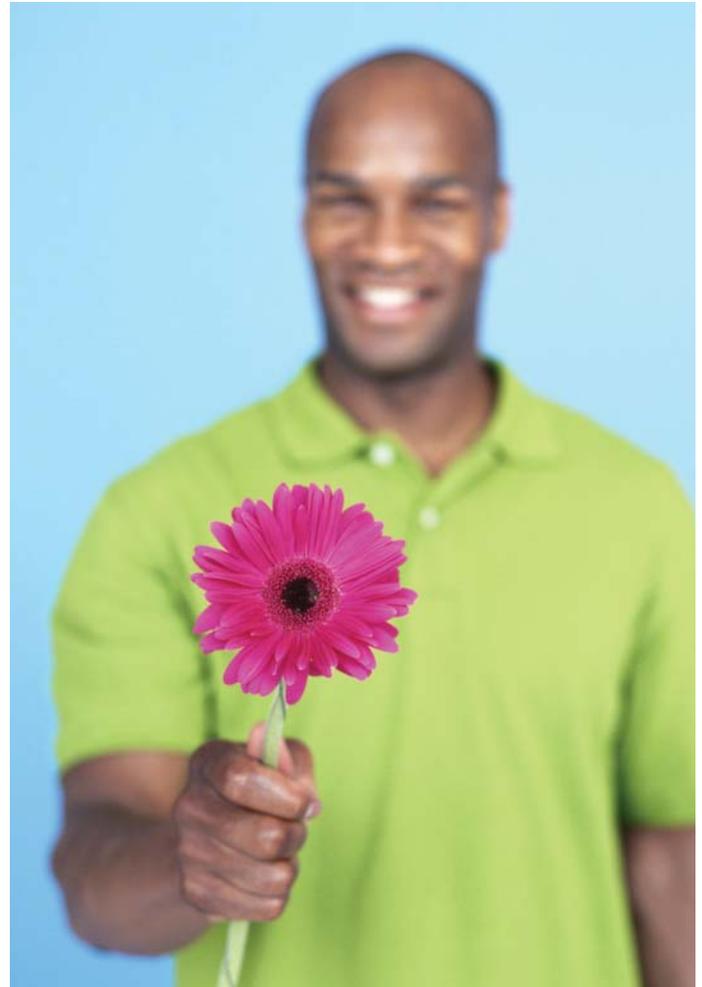
The period when someone is actively talking for the first time about sexual orientation or gender identity with family, friends, coworkers, classmates, and others.

Stage 3: Living out

The ongoing phase after initially talking with the people closest to them, they are now able to tell new people that come into their lives – when it feels appropriate. Negotiating safety is a piece of the coming out process - this is also true of victims of sexual violence and their experiences of reaching out for support. Not all survivors, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, feel comfortable disclosing.

This must be kept in mind when serving all survivors; while the coming out process may be empowering and a source of strength for some, for others it may be a barrier to accessing services following a sexual assault. For example:

- A victim may not yet be out to themselves, which can add to the complexities of the healing process, as it will impact how they define what happened to them.
- If someone is just starting the coming out process or is exploring their sexual orientation, a sexual assault by a same sex acquaintance or date may cause them to further question their sexual orientation. For



example, if a gay man is assaulted on one of his first dates with a man, he may wonder, “If this is what gay sex is (violent, fear inducing or shameful), do I really want to do this?”

- People who were not yet out when they were assaulted may question whether they identify as LGBTQ in response to the assault. A person’s gender identity or sexuality is never caused by an act of violence.
- A survivor may fear being outed if the perpetrator was a partner or date. Disclosing circumstances of the assault may force them to come out before they are ready. Disclosure may also force them to be out to people they would normally choose not to be out to, such as law enforcement, medical personnel, or

service providers with whom they work.

- Sometimes people are not out to friends, family members, members of a faith community, or teachers, guidance counselors or other mentors and supports. This limits to whom and how much they can disclose, and sometimes completely closes the door to support.
- Service providers who do not have knowledge of the coming out process or of LGBTQ issues may be insensitive to what a victim/survivor wants to discuss. For example, a provider may focus on the coming out process when that may not be the most pressing issue for the victim/survivor.
- Seeking services at an LGBTQ-identified agency in itself outs a victim. Additionally,

the survivor may also fear being outed by a service provider. For example, youth may fear that a counselor will tell parents or caregivers details of the assault or about struggles with sexual or gender identity.

- Individuals who identify as LGBTQ may blame their assault on their sexual orientation or gender identity. This can lead to conflicted feelings toward oneself and isolation from others.
- For some people, especially individuals who identify as transgender, being out may increase their risk for violence and ridicule.

It may be helpful for victims in the coming out process to know that it's OK to be confused, or to be uncertain about whether (or how) they should come out (PFLAG, 2009). It may also



be helpful for them to know that they are not alone, both in healing from the sexual assault as well as in their coming out process. There are people with similar questions and concerns, and there are people who have already found their own answers (PFLAG, 2009). Additionally, discussing confidentiality may empower a victim/survivor who may be reluctant to discuss details with a counselor or advocate.

For more information about coming out, please visit Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) at www.pflag.org, or the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) at www.hrc.org. The HRC Coming Out Resource Guides include information and tools for coming out, including making a coming-out plan, telling friends and family, and more. Other guides include specific resources for coming out as bisexual, transgender, in communities of color, in places of worship, and as a straight ally.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

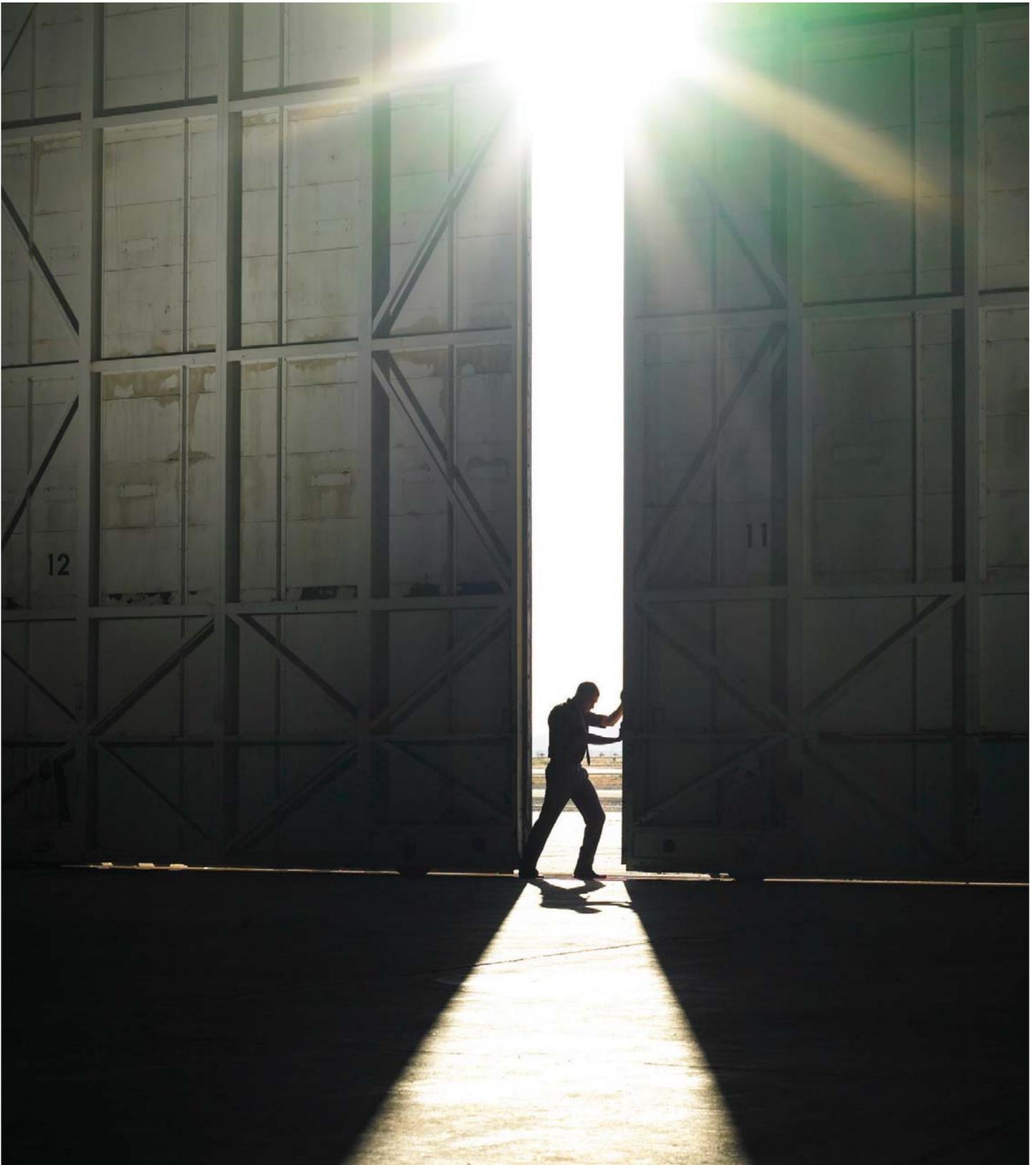
Throughout this guide, the terms “victim” and “survivor” are used interchangeably to be inclusive of the various ways people who have experienced sexual violence may identify. The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) recognizes and supports the use of person-first terminology that honors and respects the whole person, which is also reflected in this guide. Finally, PCAR acknowledges that individuals should ultimately choose the language that is used to describe their experiences and therefore supports advocacy approaches that are person-centered and that use the terminology preferred by individuals they serve.

CONTRIBUTIONS

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) would like to thank Sarah Dawgert for contributing to the content of this resource. Sarah Dawgert, MSW, is a consultant to organizations working to empower communities and increase awareness of issues surrounding women’s health and wellness. Sarah has worked in the anti-poverty and anti-sexual violence movements since 1996. Prior to launching her current consulting firm, Sarah managed the education and volunteer programs at the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center. She also spent several years working with homeless and low-income women and families in San Francisco’s Tenderloin neighborhood. Sarah has trained and coordinated community educators, developed and implemented needs/strengths assessments for service organizations, and facilitated state certification trainings for rape crisis counselors. She has trained on a range of issues related to sexual violence, has spoken at national and local conferences, and has been cited and published in dozens of regional and national media outlets. Sarah has a Bachelor’s Degree in Human Development from Boston College and a Masters of Social Work from Boston University.

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