

The Journey to Acceptance for LGBT Persons and Their Families

These stages are gleaned from written materials and conversations with people who have experienced what is often described as “the unexpected journey” from first awareness to acceptance and pride in the personal identity of sexual orientation or gender variance in themselves or someone they love.

As with any journey, some may stay stuck in one place and may never reach the stage of acceptance. That’s a choice. Others’ paths may lead them to jump certain phases or they may travel in a different order on their way toward personal pride in claiming who they are. In recent years where more parents are more aware about issues of sexual orientation, there are many parents who seem to leap from first Awareness to Acceptance. However, even parents, who think of themselves as very accepting of gay and transgender people in general, find that they still have some work to do when it comes to their own child.

Phase 1 First Awareness and Shock

Parent: “How can this be true? Not my child---it must be a phase. (S)he’ll grow out of it.”

GLB: “In grade school I had a crush on my same-sex friend/teacher. I knew I was different.”

Transgender: “When I was four I knew God had made a mistake and I was meant to be the other gender. I wasn’t like the others but I had no language for it.”

Phase 2 Denial and Blame

Parent: “Where did I go wrong? Am I to blame? Maybe a counselor/pastor can help. It must be the group he hangs around with. They’ve influenced him/her to be gay.”

GLB: “I don’t want to be gay. I’ll do whatever I can to be like everyone else. Maybe if I ignore the feelings, they’ll go away. Maybe if I dated the opposite sex...or even got married...”

Transgender: “I will learn to keep my secret. I will dress differently in private. I will have my own fantasy and pretend. I am mad at God and the world because I don’t fit in.”

Phase 3 Fear and Guilt

Parent: “What if our friends or the neighbors find out? They’ll think I’m a bad parent. We can’t let Grandma know. It would kill her. I don’t know my child any more. I’m scared we’ll never be close again.”

GLB: “I am all alone. I can’t talk to my parents. They don’t understand me. They may kick me out of the house. I could get beat up at school if anyone finds out my secret.”

Transgender: “I hate people who tease me and call me names. Why is this happening to me? Does God hate me too? My parents may not believe me if I tell them that I’m supposed to be the other gender. Or they could hate me or kick me out. I am very unhappy and alone.”

Phase 4 Learning to Understand

Parent: “I don’t know enough about what it means to be gay or trans. Is it hereditary? Is it a choice? Is it sinful? I’m so confused. What if my child can never change? I need more information.”

GLB: “I’ve got to find out more. I’ll go on the web. Maybe Facebook will help me find others like me. I’ll hang out where I might meet someone like me. I need someone to talk to.”

Transgender: “I’ll read about what trans means? I’ll go on the web, find others to talk to. Do I have to have an operation? What will that mean to my life as I know it? Will I lose everything?”

Phase 5 Reaching Out for Acceptance

Parent: “Reading about it isn’t enough. I need to talk with someone who knows more about this and what I’m feeling. Someone told me I should call PFLAG for support. I don’t know if I want to go to some meeting. I might know someone there but a phone call won’t hurt.”

GLB: “I think I saw something about a Gay Straight Alliance after school. If we don’t have to come out to anyone, I might give it a try.”

Transgender: “I’ll go to that Trans Support group I heard about. They tell me it’s confidential. Maybe I’ll drop in and check it out.”

Phase 6 Coming Out

Parent: “I decided to tell my family at the Family Reunion. If they don’t understand, then that’s their problem. If I lose some friends, so be it. My child is more important than what others think. I don’t have to feel guilty anymore. I still want to learn more but I feel free now. What a relief!”

GLB: “I can’t keep this secret any more. I told my best friend who was cool with it. A big weight has been lifted from me. Even if people call me names, it’s worth it just to be who I am without secrets. I know coming out will have to happen over and over again. I’m ready.”

Trangender: “I have decided to dress to fit the way I feel inside. I can take the stares and dumb questions because I know who I am. It feels so good to be free to be the real me. I am so happy!”

Phase 7 Beyond Acceptance to Proud Activism

Parent: “I am so proud of the way my child has come into her/his own. I have learned so much. Now I’m ready to give back...to speak out when I hear a gay joke, to tell others that I have a LGBT child and not feel embarrassed. I may even walk in the Pride Parade with PFLAG. Maybe it’s time to join PFLAG. I’ll volunteer to help other parents.”

LGB: “I’m happy to share my story if it can help others to be more accepting. I am comfortable in my own skin and I’m willing to be part of whatever actions are necessary to stop bullying of other kids who are scared like I was. I’ll speak to my legislator about gay rights.”

Transgender: “It’s time to give back. I will work to pass legislation that will end job discrimination for people like me. I will speak publicly to educate straight people who don’t have a clue. I will join PFLAG and be a Trans Coordinator or attend the Creating Change Conference to be part of the movement for equality.”

Created by Jean Hodges, PFLAG Boulder, in collaboration with other PFLAG parents and members of the LGBT community. One size does not fit all, but please be aware that for everyone there is a process of individual growth to become accepting of self and others. These phases were inspired by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s Stages of Death and Dying.