

A Case Study on Coming Out: Theoretical and Practical Implications for Psychological Counseling

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Abstract

Introduction: *Coming out to parents can be a really challenging and stressful experience for gay and lesbian people, as they are faced with a wide variety of fears, such as fear of rejection, disapproval or even aggression, losing the support and love from their families. In fact, coming out to parents per se is not as problematic as facing and dealing with the possible negative outcomes in the family relationships after the disclosure. Parents of gay and lesbian persons also internalize the negative social attitudes and mythologies regarding the gay/lesbian identity and implicitly expect their children to be heterosexual and live their life according to the traditional family model. In this context, the disclosure of the gay/lesbian identity can produce significant changes in the family dynamics. After the disclosure, parents need to manage their own feelings and challenge their prejudices in order to understand the reality of their son or daughter being gay or lesbian.*

Objectives: *This study analyzes and connects different theoretical aspects regarding coming out to parents with practical implications in counseling clients who want to disclose their gay/lesbian identity to their parents.*

Methods: *The methods used are based mainly on grounded research and consist of a case study presentation and literature review regarding coming out to parents and its influence on the family system.*

Results: *Aspects regarding the psychological effects of coming out, parents' reactions and possible changes in the dynamics of the family are discussed. Also, a case study on a client coming out to her mother is illustrated, in order to emphasize a counseling process centered on preparing and supporting a client to come out. Different psychological mechanisms and dynamics within the mother-daughter relationship are analyzed and clarified in order to offer a broader perspective on how to manage the disclosure both before and after coming out.*

Conclusions: *Coming out to parents represents only a first step, being followed by having to deal with parents' reactions, their own process towards acceptance or tolerance, as well as the potential changes in the dynamics of the family system after the disclosure. Having multiple implications in the family life and the relationships between its members, coming out should be carefully considered and prepared. Practitioners working with gay or lesbian clients who want to come out to their parents should assist and accompany their clients in building some landmarks for the moment of the disclosure and also in activating the clients' inner resources to help them cope with potential negative outcomes.*

Keywords: *coming out, parents, gay/lesbian identity, family dynamics*

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Introduction

Coming out is the process through which lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people accept and publicly affirm their sexual orientation or gender identity. Generally, the coming out process involves two major tasks: coming out to self and coming out to others. Coming out to oneself is the process during which, based on significant events, the individual moves from denial or non-recognition to self-recognition and acceptance of his/her minority sexual identity. Coming out to others refers to the voluntary sharing of homoerotic feelings and experiences with others, including colleagues, friends, family and society in general (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996).

Coming out influences the social, psychological and sexual functioning of individuals (Weinberg & Williams, 1974, apud Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996). Highlighting the socio-cultural aspects of the coming out process, some authors have seen it as a ritual that marks a significant life change, being made up of several “ceremonies”: “coming out refers to both self-development and the request of social rights” (Herdt & Boxer, 1993, apud Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996, p. 114).

Most conceptualizations of coming out have incorporated three dimensions: recognizing homosexual feelings and desires, making efforts to fulfill these desires, and revealing this sexual orientation towards trustworthy people (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1993; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996). Some theorists of coming out considered it to be a singular event involving a change of the gestalt, in which the individual suddenly realizes that he is gay or bisexual, while others viewed it as a series of reconstructions of perceptions, evaluations and engagements, determined by the affirmation of one’s gay or lesbian identity (Davis, 1992, as cited in Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996). Davis makes a distinction between “individuality”, which designates the process by which a person comes to the conclusion that he is gay or bisexual, and “disclosure” – the process by which others learn about the person’s sexual orientation. Individualization and disclosure are not linear processes, but they constantly interact within a reciprocal relationship. As Davis himself states, “the two processes appear in a dialectical relationship: coming out to others contributes to the constant redefinition of the concept of self, and the development of personal identity guides the process of revelation” (p. 114).

Traditional patterns of gay identity models are generally characterized by the initial awareness of the person feeling different from others; the emergence of

feelings, desires and needs towards same sex persons; first gay experiences; involvement in the gay community; self-labeling as gay or lesbian; and revealing the gay or lesbian identity to others. From the first awareness of the existence of homoerotic feelings to the integration of gay/lesbian identity, there is a long process, which can take place throughout the person’s entire life. Some people go faster than others through the different stages of this process, while some individuals may remain stuck in a stage, and may not evolve to the final stages of identity integration. Moreover, the outgoing process can begin at any age and at any time in life (Barret & Logan, 2002).

Social aspects in coming out

Coming out to another person is a form of self-disclosure that involves communicating self-information which cannot be observed in a direct manner. Communicating personal beliefs, ideologies, life experiences, or one’s sexual orientation are forms of self-disclosure, as they are personal aspects to which others have access only if they are communicated directly (Herek, 2003).

In general, self-disclosure is important to people, having beneficial effects both personally and socially. Self-disclosure is a natural component in human interactions. Even in ordinary conversations with people who are not necessarily close, individuals reveal personal aspects about themselves, such as their relationship status, political views, or personal perceptions and interpretations about certain social issues. Self-disclosure contributes to forming and maintaining relationships with family members, friends, colleagues, neighbors and other categories of people (Derlega & Berg, 1987). The availability of the person to disclose him/herself to others is shown to improve social life and relationships, while concealing personal aspects in relation to significant others leads to social isolation and loneliness (Davis & Franzoi, 1986).

Self-disclosure may imply different degrees of intimacy, and interpersonal relationships become closer as the people involved make more intimate self-disclosures. Sharing such information about one’s own person becomes personal or intimate to the extent that the aspects revealed have an emotional burden, provide a personality view, and contribute to differentiation from others. They may also bring to light individual characteristics that are not observable to others, or which are considered by society to be undesirable and highlight personal traits that can be perceived as vulnerabilities (Herek, 2003).

In addition, the level of intimacy in a relationship is usually reciprocal, so it is expected that the persons involved in the relationship also reveal personal information about themselves (Derlega & Berg, 1987). The lack of reciprocity in self-disclosure determines tensions in the relationship (Sprecher & Hendrik, 2004).

For people who hide certain information about themselves, fearing the risk of social stigma, the process of self-disclosure is more complicated. In this context, stigmatization refers to the presence of social patterns of discrediting, devaluing or discriminating a person as a result of the judgments of value that others around the individual give about certain characteristics or about belonging to a certain group (Herek, 2003). There are individual stigmatized social features that are visible, such as skin color/ physical disabilities, and unobservable features such as gay identity or membership to socially ostracized groups. Individuals living with such a social stigma may encounter difficulties in self-disclosure or maintaining the reciprocity of personal disclosures in their interpersonal relationships.

Despite the possible consequences that gay and lesbian people may face as a result of revealing their identity, there are also several psychological and social positive effects associated with coming out: building close, authentic relationships (Garnets & Kimmel, 2003), increasing psychological well-being (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; D'Augelli, 1994) and improved health (Larson & Chastain, 1990; Pennebaker & Susman, 1988), as well as changing negative social attitudes regarding LGBT people (Sarbin, 1996; Herek & Capitano, 1996).

The influence of coming out on the family system

Most gay people live the experience of coming out to their family with the fear that their parents will not be able to understand and accept them unconditionally and, as a result, they expect to be rejected by their loved ones. Brown (1989) identified three scenarios in which the disclosure of the gay identity is avoided by both the gay person and the family system:

1. "Maintaining a physical and emotional distance from the family". This scenario is characterized by minimizing the contact with the family of origin and avoiding answering family questions about intimate life. Gay and lesbian people feel alienated by family members who, in their turn, feel rejected, unable to understand the cause of the existing emotional distance.

2. The "I Know You Know" scenario. In this scenario, there is a kind of tacit understanding between

family members and the gay person on not talking about this private life issue. Denial is the central theme present in this family scenario. Although family members know about the identity of the gay person, they often continue to interact with the person as if he/she is heterosexual. In this situation, we are talking about a conscious denial, which is maintained in the family system by both the gay person and other family members, in order to avoid conflicts and eventual disruptions in family relationships.

3. The "Don't Tell Your Father" scenario. In this scenario, the gay person reveals his/her identity to one of the parents or brothers, usually to the one who is perceived as being more supportive and open. As a result of this disclosure, a family member who knows that such information would irreparably affect other family members, allies with the gay person in keeping this secret from the other parent, siblings, grandparents or other relatives. A family subsystem is formed around the information about the gay identity of a member. The family secret has two dimensions in this situation: hiding the gay member's identity from other family members and hiding the fact that a person in the family knows the secret.

As a result of coming out, the boundaries between the family of origin and the extended family can become extremely rigid in order to keep the secret inside, like in a prison with impenetrable walls. The typical reactions of family members in this situation are based on fusion, pseudo-reciprocity (all family members have the task of guarding the secret) and shame (Brown, 1989).

Parent's reactions

In many ways, accepting the gay or lesbian identity of one's own child is a process similar to mourning, in terms of the psychological mechanism and dynamic. Barret and Logan (2002) consider that the parents' process starts with shock and denial – parents can deny that what has been revealed to them is true, rationalizing and interpreting coming out as a possible momentary confusion of their child or avoiding family discussions on their child's sexual identity; then comes guilt – some parents may feel responsible for the sexual orientation of their child, believing that they did something very wrong as parents; afterwards, parents might be attempting to manage the situation – while trying to integrate the information they have learned from the disclosure into the family life, parents may react hostile or aggressive towards their gay son or lesbian daughter, may interact without hostility with their child, but with the prohibition of ever speaking of homosexuality in the family, or may react supportively and empathically towards their gay child; last but not least, we

can talk about acceptance – parents continue to love and support their child unconditionally, understanding that his/her sexual orientation is only a part of what he/she represents as a person.

Studies regarding coming out to parents showed that parents' initial reactions are very emotional and often negative, but in time, through a process of adaptation and coping, they tend to become more positive and acceptant (Freedman, 2008; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998; Ben Ari, 1995). Also, parental reactions seem to be influenced by family, cultural and religious values (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Another study highlighted that, in time, religious parents tend to change their beliefs regarding the "sinfulness of homosexuality" and to question their own beliefs system in order to maintain a positive relationship with their child after coming out (Campbell, Zaporozhets & Yarhouse, 2018).

Parental responses differ from one family to another, and it is also possible that, in the same family system, the parents may have different reactions to the sexual orientation of their child. However, parents' attitudes, feelings, behaviors and experiences related to finding out that they have a gay son or a lesbian daughter can be grouped around some main themes, which have been identified and described by Bernstein (1990):

- **Social stigmatization.** Parents fear that they might be perceived negatively, as if they have failed to raise their child properly or as if they have an abnormal child, and because of that many parents feel humiliated or embarrassed when they find out their child is gay.
- **Self-defaming and/or blaming the spouse.** Living in a society that perpetuates the same social prejudice, most parents think that being gay is "caused" by certain psychological factors and either blame themselves or blame their partner or others outside the family (the child's friends or teachers). The most common "reasons" that parents think of while trying to explain themselves their child's gay or lesbian identity include: negative experiences of the child in relation to opposite sex; the influence of the group or other gay and lesbian people the child has known; any health problems that mother has had during pregnancy; divorce, separation or couple problems; the belief that they or the other parent were too strict, tough, critical, abusive, emotionally distant or otherwise too close and permissive in relationship to the

child or the fact that there were no positive masculine and feminine models in the family.

- **Loss.** Many parents suffer when they feel that traditional family life is lost and will not be able to share with the new generation important rituals such as weddings or baptisms. Before they can truly accept their gay son or lesbian daughter, who are part of the present, not of an imagined future, parents have to integrate the suffering from the loss of the fantasy of having a heterosexual child (Brown, 1989).
- **Fear and concern** for their child. In the case of parents of gay children, three major fears have been identified (Bernstein, 1990): the fear that the child might contract the HIV virus, the fear of HIV-related illnesses and the fear that the child might die. In addition, many parents believe that homosexual relationships are not stable, so their children cannot have couple experiences that make them happy, such as marriage, the birth of a child, and the formation of a traditional family. Another concern is related to discrimination, stigmatization and social marginalization. Parents fear that their gay child might be a victim of discrimination at work, might be offended and ridiculed, rejected by friends and society or might be the target of physical aggression.
- **Fear of losing** their son or daughter. There are parents who are afraid to show or express in any way their negative feelings or opinions about their child's gay identity because they are afraid they will be rejected by their child. Most parents who are in such a situation feel isolated or distant from their child, as if, instead of getting closer, the coming out has interposed a barrier in their relationship. Often, parents fear that their questions and discussions about their child's sexual identity might be interpreted as intrusions or criticism and choose not to engage in conversation on the subject.

Supporting a client in coming out

Gay men and women may need psychological support to reveal their sexual identity and make decisions about keeping, relinquishing or redefining relationships with others after coming out. Therapists can assist gay clients in clarifying their decision to reveal their sexual identity to certain people in their lives, explore the benefits and potential consequences of

this decision, and assume the possibility that relationships with those people will likely change.

For some clients, disclosing their identity to certain people and hiding it from others can be an adaptive mechanism that helps them maintain family, social or economic support that is offered to them (Green, 2000, as cited in Beckstead & Israel, 2007). Selective disclosure can help avoid certain conflicts or unpleasant or even potentially traumatic situations or experiences. The advantages and disadvantages of coming out differ from one context to another and from one relationship to another, so it is important that gay and lesbian clients explore these aspects according to the specificity of each situation in their lives. It is also necessary to become aware of and activate their inner resources in order to cope with the loss of a relationship with a close person, their fears and those of others, as well as possible situations of discrimination that sometimes accompany the choice to come out (Beckstead & Israel, 2007). Support from other gay and lesbian people is indispensable, especially in the case of the first disclosure of gay identity or in situations where the person is rejected by very close people.

Mental health specialists working with gay and lesbian clients will surely be faced with the situation of helping and supporting their clients in their coming out process. Berzon (1988) developed a brief model of supporting clients to come out, which consists of helping the client to find his/her answers to the following questions:

- **Who?** Who is the person the client wants to come out to and what is their relationship like? Also, the therapist should explore together with his client the possible reactions after coming out and how that might influence the relationship.
- **What?** The therapist should help his client prepare what to say when he/she comes out.
- **Why?** Before coming out, the client should be aware of his/her motivation and also, he/she should be prepared to answer different questions regarding being gay or lesbian, that the person to whom he/she intends to come out might ask.
- **Where?** The therapist should help the client decide where he/she wants to disclose his/her gay/lesbian identity.
- **When?** The client should be supported by the therapist to choose the right moment to disclose, both for himself and for the person to whom he/she comes out.

Barret and Logan (2002) offer some suggestions regarding coming out to parents, which include:

- feeling comfortable with being gay or lesbian and being clear about one's sexual identity before considering coming out;
- coming out in an adequate moment for the person to whom the disclosure is taking place. This means avoiding to come out in moments of major stress experienced by the parents, such as health problems, divorce or strong conflicts within the family relationships, work related problems and avoiding to come out during a conflict with the parents;
- being prepared to face a wide range of emotions that coming out might bring out in the person to whom the disclosure is being made. Many parents might feel embarrassed, shocked or angry at first, but in time, they can become more supportive and acceptant as they challenge and overcome their own prejudice and stereotypes;
- keeping an open and non-violent communication with parents after coming out and giving them time to adjust and understand the situation. It will probably take time, as it is a process for them too;
- encouraging parents to meet other gay and lesbian people and to get more information about what it means to have a gay or lesbian identity.

In consequence, mental health practitioners working with gay and lesbian clients should be prepared to assist their clients with these issues and to provide proper support. The therapeutic relationship should serve as a resource for the client and the therapist should be aware and work on his own homophobia in order to be able to assist a gay or lesbian client in a non-judgmental and caring way.

A case study on coming out

The client's background before starting the counseling process

Anna wants to start a counseling process because she wants to reveal her lesbian identity to her mother and expects that, through psychological counseling, she will manage to find the best way to come out. She is afraid that her mother will be very afflicted, but she also claims she does not want to lie to her anymore, feeling the need to be honest in relation to her mother. Anna became aware of her sexual orientation

five years ago when she fell in love with a faculty colleague. She affirms that she started having doubts about her sexual orientation since adolescence, because she never felt attracted to men, like the girls around her. Currently she lives with her partner, with whom she has a relationship for about 2 years. She is pleased with the current relationship and says: "It is giving me everything I ever wanted". The only problem that she encounters at the present moment is lying to her mother about her identity, which makes her feel guilty.

Hiding her identity in relation to her mother manifests itself in the form of "small lies", as she calls them. The mother knows that her current partner is her best friend. Because the mother was asking about her couple life, she also told her mother that she had a boyfriend, but they broke up because he was cheating on her and that's why she no longer wants to get involved with a man. She is also disturbed by the fact that when she goes to visit her mother with her partner she has to be very controlled, as not to "reveal" themselves: "We mustn't stay very close to one another or look or smile at each other like this, like we are in love. It seems to me as if any gesture and movement are under a magnifying glass".

She has never told anyone outside the community about her sexual orientation, the only people who know about her are her gay and lesbian friends. So her mother would be the first significant person to whom she wants to come out. She fears that her mother could be very affected by this news and that their relationship would degrade, her mother rejecting her. About her mother, Anna has only words of praise. She sees her as "loving, strong, funny, ambitious, intelligent, the best mother".

Anna's parents divorced three years before. The separation took place because her father fell in love with another woman, to whom he is currently married. It is being said (in her family) that her mother knew that her husband had been having an affair for years, but "chose not to do anything about it". After the divorce proceedings had completed, her mother was diagnosed with cancer and was operated on, following a cytostatic treatment after the surgery, and at the present moment the cancer is in remission. Anna's biggest fear is that when her mother finds out that she has a lesbian daughter, the cancer will return. In fact, another myth that runs in her family is that her mother "developed her cancer because of the suffering that she has been through with the divorce".

With her father leaving the family, followed by the confirmation of the cancer diagnosis, Anna felt responsible for her mother, and she assumed a partner

role in their relationship. In addition, she strongly identifies herself with her mother and feels guilty because she is lesbian, considering that she, just like her father, has strongly disappointed her.

The main directions in the counseling process

Anna's counseling approach was centered on building certain out coming landmarks and also on clarifying her relationship with her mother. In the experiential therapeutic labor, Anna has explored and become aware of her, as well as her mother's expectations, feelings and needs in their relationship, which has facilitated the understanding of the different roles the two of them have in their family relationships. At the same time, Anna explored the familial mythologies regarding her mother's illness, and also her personal beliefs about her mother's state of health. Anna perceives her mother as a strong person who has faced many difficulties in life and has managed to maintain her inner balance and confident attitude. More than that, she considers that her mother has kept an optimistic attitude and a strong motivation for living after she was diagnosed cancer and believes that these were the most important resources that helped her fight the disease. In consequence, Anna realizes that her mother is not as helpless as she imagined, but on the contrary, she is "a determined person, a true fighter". Being aware of her mother's resources, Anna gains more confidence in her ability to cope with her coming out.

In addition, Anna manages to identify the resources in the relationship with her mother, who supported her unconditionally in different stages of her life. Such a moment was when she wanted to drop out of College to stay at home with her mother and care for her (after the divorce and surgery). Her mother encouraged her to continue her studies, assuring Anna that she "can do it alone", which she did in the end: she went alone to the cytostatic treatment, prepared her meals according to the prescribed diet, always took her pills and followed with no exception the doctors' instructions. Identifying herself with her mother, Anna developed a loyalty to her, feeling herself "due" to her, and unconsciously attributing herself an overprotective role in relationship to her mother.

Anna managed to clarify what she wants her mother to know about her when coming out, as well as to structure her own milestones for revealing her sexual identity. She wants her mother to know she loves her and needs her support and acceptance. She also wants her to know that she has always felt different, and it has been difficult for her to understand why she felt like that, but

she has managed to accept herself and is happy now in her couple relationship. Anna expects to feel as if a huge burden is taken off her shoulders if she will be able to come out to her mother.

Next, Anna realized that it is important to give her mother some time in order to be able to accept that she has a lesbian daughter, to keep an open and assertive communication regardless of her mother's initial reaction, as well as to be emotionally available to support her mother in the process of accepting her daughter's lesbian identity. By going through various possible coming out scenarios, Anna stopped at a scenario based on acceptance and trust and considered that although her mother might feel shocked at first, she would not reject her, remembering what her mother had told her in the past: "All I want in life is for you to be happy."

The effects of the counseling process

During the intervention, Anna managed to differentiate herself from her mother, which allowed her to identify her mother's resources, her own resources, and the resources in their relationship, which served as anchors in the process of revealing her sexual identity. She understood and took responsibility for her own identity, fears and expectations, building up some landmarks in coming out to her mother, which helped her overcome her fears and reveal herself in a genuine way.

Following these milestones, Anna came out to her mother, and her mother's reaction was a positive one, as she says. Her mother cried a lot during the disclosure and told her that somewhere inside she already knew. She had expressed her concern about the social difficulties Anna has to face as a lesbian woman, while also expressing her confidence in her. Their relationship remained as close as before, gaining more honesty and authenticity.

Next, the effects of the therapeutic intervention will be presented from Anna's perspective: "I came to the psychologist because I had a strong inner pressure as I was lying to my mother and doing it just felt very wrong. At the same time, I was very afraid that this news would devastate her and she would not be able to recover from shock if she found out about me. I felt like being trapped. I did not know how to tell her, when to tell her or what to do after I tell her. But I understood that the most important thing was to be prepared and trust myself. I understood that acceptance depends on both me and her. Above all, I became aware that sometimes suffering cannot be avoided, and all you can do for a dear one who is suffering is be there, as much as you can. That's what I tried to do with my mother, and I did

not feel guilty because I'm not how I imagined she wanted me to be, probably how most parents want their children to be like, heterosexual so they could live a 'normal' life. I'm feeling really liberated now that the burden of hiding is gone."

Conclusions

In a society that continues to face lots of stereotypes, prejudice and no legal recognition of same-sex relationships, coming out can become a really difficult or even frightening experience. Moreover, coming to terms with one's gay or lesbian identity in such a social context can be an overwhelming and challenging process.

Coming out as gay or lesbian to parents can be a stressful experience and can bring to surface old family wounds and dysfunctional patterns, that are not directly connected to the disclosure of the gay or lesbian identity. Unresolved conflicts and older family "coalitions" can be reactivated in the context of disclosing the gay or lesbian identity of a member. If there is a history of dysfunctional patterns in the family relationships, the old wounds and family secrets are exposed in the members' attempt to explain the presence of homosexuality in the family system. Thus, coming out can become the central theme of accusations, conflicts, and relationship segregation although the causes of these dynamics are not related to coming out per se, but rather to unresolved secrets and issues from the family past (Brown, 1989).

In addition, within the parental subsystem, there may be tensions or couple conflicts when the two parents find out that they have a gay son or a lesbian daughter. When parents have a dysfunctional couple relationship or when there is a confusion of family roles, the two parents can either ally against their gay child or one of the parents may coalesce with the gay son or lesbian daughter against the other parent (Zitter, 1987). In a dysfunctional family system, a gay member who reveals his identity can become the "scapegoat" for all unsolved family issues. If the gay person was invested by parents with a negative role (a disobedient or rebellious child) prior to the disclosure, this role will be potentiated, the gay person becoming thus the "black sheep of the family".

When they find out that they have a gay son or a lesbian daughter, some parents experience a sense of loss, more exactly the loss of the child they have imagined. Even before birth, parents start building various scenarios about the child they expect and project their own desires or fears onto their children, expecting them to follow their example or, on the contrary, to succeed where they have failed. In the minds of parents,

a scenario emerges as to how their child is like and what he needs to do in life in order to succeed. Upon coming out, these scenarios about their children are breaking down, and parents find themselves in a reality they did not expect. The child they have imagined according to their own scenario is lost and in front of them stands another person, whom they feel they've just met. That is why accepting a child's gay or lesbian identity is a process, similar in its psychological dynamic to the grief process (Barret & Logan, 2002).

In some situations (when parents were perceived to react with denial and the child did not evaluate the parent-child relationship to be satisfactory after coming out), some individuals might feel the need to come out to their parents a second time in order to reinforce their sexual orientation, to clarify aspects regarding gay or lesbian identities and share information about their gay or lesbian lifestyle (Denes & Afifi, 2014).

After coming out, not only the attitudes and feelings of parents and their children are important in the dynamics of family life, but also how they relate and live their daily family life after the disclosure. Four parent-child interaction were identified after coming out: an interaction based on love and openness, an interaction based on love and denial, an interaction based on resentments and denial and an interaction based on hostile recognition of the child's gay or lesbian identity (Muller, 1987). In a study conducted by LaSala (2000) all gay participants who had come out to their parents faced an initial disapproval of their identity and relationships, but most of them believed that coming out had a positive impact on their couple relationship, as they did not have to hide their relationship from their family and, also, they could include their partner in family events.

Families that have highly rigid rules and boundaries tend to be inflexible to many other aspects, including the acceptance of differences between people. Likewise, parents who find it difficult to speak openly about intimate or sensitive issues will most likely encounter impediments in discussing about their child's sexual identity. At the same time, parents who do not allow their children to "grow up" and differentiate themselves can be victimized by the disclosure, insisting on maintaining the child's loyalty towards their rules and beliefs (Laird, 1988).

Parents' support of their child's gay or lesbian identity, parents' attempts to control their child's sexual orientation and parents' struggle with their child's coming out are associated with the child's psychological adjustment after coming out (D'Amico, Julien, Tremblay, Chartrand, 2015). Gay and lesbian

individuals who perceive their relationship with their parents as supportive prior to coming out are more likely to express their identity within the family system and to disclose their identity to their parents, as compared to those who perceive their family relationships as weak in terms of resources (Waldner & Magrader, 2008). In addition, gay and lesbian people who have come out to their parents report high levels of acceptance from parents and less rejection from their fathers' in their childhood, while current rejection of sexual orientation is associated with alcohol and drug consumption (D'Amico & Julien, 2012).

Having multiple ramifications in interpersonal relationships and the family system, coming out to parents should be carefully planned and considered. In planning their sexual identity disclosure, it is important for gay and lesbian people to build their expectations in relation to their parents' general patterns of response to difficult situations. In addition, gay men and lesbian women who want to reveal their identity to their family must be willing to offer time to family members to process this information and adapt to the situation. A first negative reaction does not mean that parents will never accept having a gay son or a lesbian, but often represents only a first reaction to the shock. Shock and suffering can manifest in different ways, from withdrawal and closure to anger and conflict. Therefore, it is important for people coming out to maintain a non-violent communication with the family after the moment of the disclosure.

It is also important that, before coming out to parents, gay men and lesbian women be generally reconciled with their identity and have the inner resources to deal with the coming out situation and process. It is advisable that, before coming out, gay men and lesbian women have solved their inner conflicts related to low self-esteem, loss, anger, past family conflicts, and have managed to develop assertive communication and contact skills. Nonviolent communication and positive contact with others are based on trust, understanding, and the clear and authentic expression of one's own thoughts, experiences and needs. Some of the family conflicts that may occur following the disclosure can be diminished if the parents are educated in advance about homosexuality and gay relationships. A study led by Ben-Ari (1995) highlighted that parents who had access to accurate information about gay and lesbian identities before their children's coming out, quickly adapted to the situation of having a gay child. The results of the same study also showed that positive family dynamics before the coming out tend to persist after the disclosure. Therefore,

educating parents in order to overcome their own prejudices, along with building positive relationships with families can facilitate the acceptance of a gay or lesbian member in the family. Acceptance is a process that requires time, emotional support and trust. If gay and lesbian people who disclose their identity are available to invest these resources in their relationship with their family, both before and after coming out, then the experience of coming out to one's parents can become a unifying experience.

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