

A black and white photograph of two women smiling warmly. The woman in the foreground is wearing a patterned scarf and has her eyes squinted in a joyful expression. The woman behind her has long dark hair and is also smiling broadly. The background is slightly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting.

the lesbian guide to

# COMING OUT

lasi

lesbian advocacy  
services initiative



# WHAT IS COMING OUT?

*Coming Out is the process of realising your attraction to other girls or women and deciding to tell other people that you are lesbian or bisexual.*

There isn't just way one to "come out" - it's as individual as you are.

Most lesbian and bisexual women realise their attraction to other women in their early teens, though some women don't become fully aware of these feelings or feel comfortable with them until much later in life.

Some people tell everyone, others choose to only tell

close friends or family.

A lot of women talk about feeling a big sense of relief when they finally come out and it can be a very positive and liberating experience

But you might also have fears about being rejected, or worry about the way that family, friends and co-workers might react. This is a common reaction given that there are still a lot of misconceptions out there about lesbian and bi women. And it can be extra hard if you are isolated or come from very traditional or religious background.

If you are thinking about coming out, you're not on your own. This brief guide will give you information about some of the support that's available and help you with some of the things you might be feeling.

## DID YOU KNOW...

that somewhere between 6 and 10 % of the population is lesbian, gay or bisexual.

That means there are between 107,000 and 179,000 L, G & B people living in cities, towns and rural areas all over Northern Ireland.

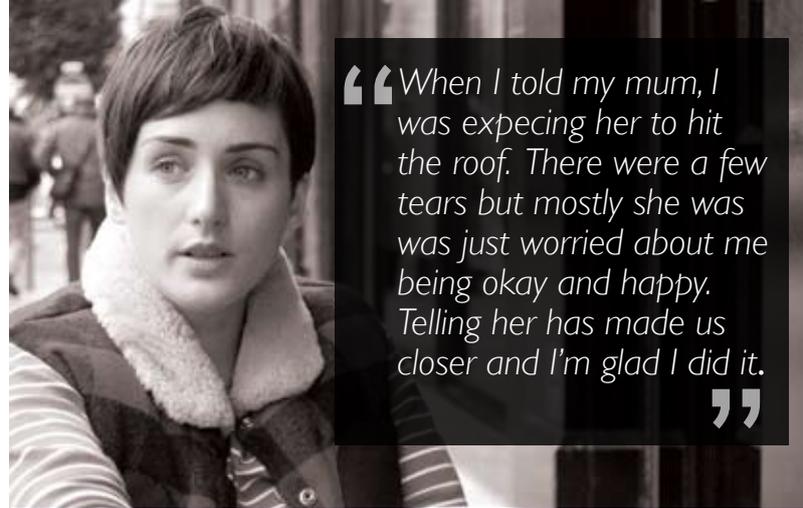
## “Can I talk to you about something?..”

When you decide to come out, it's good to start with a close friend or a person you know and trust. If you're not sure how they feel about lesbian or bi women, you can suss them out by casually mentioning a gay character on TV during a chat, or an LGBT issue in the news. Many of the people you come out to will have a positive reaction and be happy that you trusted them enough to tell them something that important. But because we still see negative messages and ideas about lesbian & bi women, people can react with everything from shock to anger to confusion. So it's always best to come out in a space where you feel safe and can leave if you feel uncomfortable. It's also helpful to have somewhere or someone reliable to go to for support afterwards if you need it.

Many people who react badly at first eventually come round when they've had some time and realise you are the same “you” that you've always been.

Unfortunately there might be others who will never be happy about you being gay or bi. If someone reacts negatively, remember - you haven't done anything wrong and have every reason to be proud of who you are. It can feel hurtful but you *will* meet people who accept you exactly as you are.

Coming out isn't something we do just once. Because the general presumption still is that we



“When I told my mum, I was expecting her to hit the roof. There were a few tears but mostly she was just worried about me being okay and happy. Telling her has made us closer and I'm glad I did it.”

are attracted to people of the opposite sex, you will end up telling people throughout your life. But remember - it's your choice who you tell and when, and it gets much easier each time.

## How Coming Out Can Effect You

Many lesbian and bisexual women feel confident with who they are but many others experience stress, anxiety and depression about their sexual orientation. This can be due to family pressures, feeling isolated or worrying about things like work or relationships. These feelings can sometimes lead to unhealthy ways of coping, like drinking too much or taking drugs. For some it can even mean self harm (hurting yourself) or thinking about suicide. If you are having any problems like these, there is help out there for you, so you don't need to deal with it alone. A bit of support can help you build up your self confidence and get you back on track.

## What Helps

If you are feeling very low or suicidal you can contact **LifeLine** 24 hours-a-day by phoning **0808 808 800** from anywhere in Northern Ireland. The helpline is a gay-friendly service and can offer immediate support when you need it most.

## Group Support & Making Friends

One of the best ways to feel good about yourself as a lesbian or bisexual woman is to build a network of supportive lesbian and bisexual women in your life, particularly when you are at the early stages of coming out. They can support you by dispelling any misconceptions you may have about being gay or bi and sharing what did and didn't work for them along their own coming out journey.

YouthAction runs a youth group specifically for young women between 18-25 who identify as other than heterosexual. There are a number of online social forums for lesbian and bisexual women and several groups in Northern Ireland that run social activities. You can also access peer support groups for older women, as well as family groups and other types of support such as counseling for lesbian and bisexual women. For up-to-date group listings & events, visit our website and join the emailing list for our regular e-newsletter.

## Things to talk to your GP about

- You can tell them about your sexual orientation
- If you are depressed, anxious, having trouble sleeping or are concerned about your drinking or drug-taking
- If you have any issues around self harming or thoughts of suicide
- If you would like to speak to a specialist counsellor or therapist
- If you'd like to be directed to local groups and support

**Contact us if you'd like support with talking to your GP.**



“When I came out I just went to the gay bars. It was fun but I wasn't always with people I trusted. Joining the youth group gave me more confidence with people.”



“Coming out was scary at first, but finding mates that I could be myself with was amazing.”

LASI Health Programme Funded by



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*If you'd like support with Coming Out or more information about local groups and services, contact LASI:*

Lesbian Advocacy  
Services Initiative,  
Belfast LGBT Centre,  
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Photos: Ruth McCarthy

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