



RECEIVING SOMEONE'S STORY

THE FIRST CONVERSATION

People share their experiences of sexuality and gender for a variety of reasons, with different hoped-for outcomes, and in an array of tones. But they all have one thing in common: vulnerability. Sexuality and the way we relate to our biological sex is a very personal thing. Your friend or family member is choosing to share an intimate piece of their life with you—whether you're the first or the last to know!

When your friend or family member shares with you for the first time, we recommend saying very little. Recognize the moment for the privileged one that it is, and listen. Below are three things we recommend the first time someone comes out:

THANK YOU FOR SHARING THIS WITH ME

I'm grateful you'd entrust me/us with this part of your life! I'm honored you wanted to tell me personally.

I LOVE YOU

You're my [son/daughter/nephew/niece/dear friend] and I love you. This doesn't change the way I see you!

I'D LOVE TO HEAR MORE. IS NOW A GOOD TIME?

I'd like to understand more of this experience in your life. Would you be open to sharing that? You've been processing this for awhile now, but this is new for me! I'd love to hear more about how this all fits together in your life.

- How long have you been experiencing this? When did you first start naming this to yourself?
- Who else knows? How did they respond?
- [For family members] What was it like growing up in our family?
- [For Christians] Where are you at with God in all of this?

ACCOMPANIMENT OVER TIME

Ideally, this is a relationship for the long haul. Don't feel pressured to stuff fifteen conversations into fifteen minutes! You'll probably have other questions, and—especially for those friends or family members raised in the Church—you may want to have a conversation around faith and morals. We don't recommend this being an extensive part of this first conversation! Why? Faith can be a loaded topic for LGBTQ persons due to misunderstandings about or the personal challenges of Church teaching. In this first conversation, establish baseline trust. Take a break—a day, a week—to pray and reflect on what you heard. Ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance on if, when, and how, you can take next steps in journeying with this person.

UNIQUE & UNREPEATABLE

At his Christmas Day message in 1978, St. John Paul II reminded us: *“for God and before God, the human being is always unique and unrepeatable, somebody thought of and chosen from all eternity, someone called and identified by his own name.”*

In any conversation, it’s important to remember that LGBTQ experiences are just that—experiences that exist within the full context of a person’s life. Not only the feelings themselves, but how we relate to those feelings. We’ve all come from different families with varying attitudes towards sexuality, gender roles, and life expectations. Our worldview and sense of self is further shaped by peer relationships, the media we consume, and what happens on our college campuses and in our workplaces. Our full context includes our culture, ethnicity, and geography. It includes our relationship to our faith—our relationship with God, how we were taught about the human person and sexual ethics, and where we plan to go from here.

The point is this: there isn’t a singular narrative of an LGBTQ experience. Any person you meet could diverge from any of the statistics you may have seen. When someone shares with you, remember that THIS PERSON is letting you in. What you’ve read and seen and heard on TV may or may not be relevant. Prepare your heart to receive the individual person before you.

TRAITS OF AN ACCOMPANYING LISTENER

- **Pay attention** | Look at the person. Put your phone on “do not disturb” and physically move to a place with less distracting stimuli, if possible.
- **Exhibit positive non-verbals** | Make eye contact. Sit calmly and control your more reactive emotional responses. Avoid gestures that you’re ready to speak while the other is still talking (i.e. sharp intake of breath, open mouth, etc).
- **Ask clarifying questions** | Ask one question at time, giving ample time for people to explain themselves. Clarify when needed, even paraphrasing the person’s response. “What I heard you saying is...is that what you mean?”
- **Allow pauses** | Before jumping in and responding immediately, allow people a few seconds to complete their thought. They may want to fill in with more information.
- **Don’t interrupt** | This comes easily, but is ultimately disrespectful. If there is a point you’d like to return to, make a mental note. It’s ok to double back in conversation with a question or during a pause.
- **Focus on the subject** | Remember, you’re not in this conversation to debate an issue. You’re in the conversation to understand a person and their life experience.

