

## Building Family and Social Support

Social isolation can be a common problem for LGBT individuals, especially those who have recently come out or are considering it. Individuals from less accepting families, communities, and social circles may also struggle with finding ways to socialize that feel safe to them. They don't have to go through this alone. LGBT individuals may benefit from discussing strategies for coming out to family members, reducing conflict, or gaining family acceptance. Resources that can provide support, information, and helpful feedback are available both within USC and in surrounding communities.

### The CWFL Edge

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning employees (or their family members) typically find comfort and realize advantages when they choose to discuss these issues with our professional staff. These advantages include:

- ✓ A secure, confidential environment
- ✓ Conversations in which you can speak freely and not worry about reaction, criticism, or judgment
- ✓ Knowledgeable staff who help you develop perspective, while always respecting your feelings and decisions
- ✓ Assistance with accessing helpful community resources and educational materials. For key links, see our web site, [www.usc.edu/worklife](http://www.usc.edu/worklife), or visit other helpful sites such as [www.usc.edu/student-affairs/glbss](http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/glbss), [www.usc.edu/dept/adminops/equity\\_diversity](http://www.usc.edu/dept/adminops/equity_diversity), and [www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org).

## HOW DO I CONTACT THE CENTER FOR WORK AND FAMILY LIFE (CWFL)?

If you are a USC staff or faculty member and are interested in scheduling an appointment with a counselor or receiving information regarding resources and referrals, phone the CWFL at (213) 821-0800. If you are an immediate family member of a USC employee, you may also phone the Center directly to request services. CWFL services are available at all USC sites by appointment. All services are free and confidential.

The Center for Work and Family Life is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

## LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER (LGBT) ISSUES

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# LGBT Issues

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT), and questioning individuals face unique challenges in the workplace. In addition to their personal life issues of identity, coming out, developing healthy relationships, socializing, and managing family dynamics, LGBT employees may face certain standards of privacy and professionalism that do not apply to the heterosexual working population.

For example, how readily do LGBT workers display pictures of their partners—or photos of them together as a couple—in their work area? Or, if they decide not to communicate openly at work about their sexual orientation, do they fear being perceived as dishonest or deceitful if it were later revealed? Employees regularly display their heterosexuality to colleagues with wedding rings, family pictures on their desks, and discussions of children and family vacations. In many work settings, people simply assume their co-workers are heterosexual unless informed otherwise. LGBT employees don't necessarily want to "hide" from their co-workers, but they don't want to draw judgment or discrimination, either (which they may have already experienced in other areas of their life).

Clearly, an honest, casual representation of sexual orientation can be complicated and even problematic in the workplace, and no formula exists to guide LGBT individuals on how to manage these issues at work. So how do they decide whether or not to communicate openly with co-workers, or when, or with whom?

## Sharing Personal Information

Faced with countless occasions to reveal or hide their sexual identity, LGBT employees may employ such strategies as inventing partners, (girlfriends, boyfriends, ex-wives, ex-husbands). However, co-workers often want more information, causing the stories to take on lives of their own. Thus, this strategy may lead to increased stress.

Many employees use avoidance strategies rather than reveal information. This is done through verbal dodges (changing the subject or rebuffing inquiries about one's sexual or romantic relationships), or avoiding any casual interactions such as lunches, parties, or sports events where exchanges of confidences are expected. This avoidance can leave the LGBT employee feeling isolated and detached.

Many LGBT employees severely limit their social involvement with peers, and this not only deprives them of important friendships, but cuts them out of social networks that may be essential for career advancement, especially in managerial positions where social interactions are crucial.

## Struggles with Identity

People who are questioning their sexual orientation can feel a range of emotions. Same-sex or bisexual attraction may feel natural and "right" to some, but confusing or troubling to others. Those who come from families, communities, or cultural backgrounds that are less accepting of homosexuality may have additional barriers in the process of self-acceptance. However, with support, information, and helpful feedback, most struggling with identity issues cope better.

## Coming Out—Positively

Coming out can be a difficult process, during which it is normal to feel scared, vulnerable, or uncertain. However, most LGBT individuals eventually come out because they no longer want to hide such an integral part of themselves. After coming out, most realize benefits of living openly, such as relief and reduced stress (caused by hiding their identity), developing more genuine relationships, enhanced self-image and self-acceptance, connecting with other LGBT individuals and communities, and a feeling of liberation.

People who accept their identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender and are considering coming out often wonder:

- ❓ When is the right time?
- ❓ What do I say?
- ❓ If I come out, will people judge me, reject me, or discriminate against me?
- ❓ Can I come out to certain people and not others? Who will be the most supportive?

## Relationship Satisfaction

A healthy work-life balance involves maintaining healthy relationships. This is no different for LGBT faculty, staff, and their families. However, they do face some unique challenges for healthy relationship development. For instance, partners may be at different stages of self-acceptance or the coming out process, which can lead to differences or conflicts in a relationship. In addition, those who have recently accepted their sexual orientation may have no prior experience in a same-sex relationship, and are unsure what to expect. LGBT individuals can work toward developing healthy relationships by meeting with trained counselors to discuss expectations, priorities, and goals.