

Probing Question: How important is coming out of the closet?

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

What is life like for young gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered people in our nation today? Your impression might depend on which news report you happen to catch. Stories reporting on Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in conservative school districts, high-profile legal victories for gay people and their advocates and even gay teens becoming Prom Queen,

suggest the nation is becoming more accepting of less traditional sexual and gender identities. Other stories about “gay bashing” hate crimes and teens being bullied to the point of despair point to a different side of America.

Is it really any easier for youth to come out as gay today?

“Absolutely,” said Anthony D’Augelli, professor of human development at Penn State. “The increased visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people helps youth come out, and they come out to families and friends who are much more knowledgeable than earlier generations.”

For some young people, deciding whether to come out or remain closeted depends on family support, added Allison Subasic, director of Penn State’s LGBTA (the “A” is for Allies) Student Resource Center. It’s getting easier overall, she agreed, “but it is still difficult for many youth for a variety of reasons, including where they live, and whether their family is involved with a religion that is not affirming of LGBT individuals.”

Said D’Augelli, “It’s important to remember that a family learning about a gay son or lesbian daughter will likely be surprised (though not always) and it will take them time and supportive resources to figure out how to be helpful. For LGBT youth, having one or two very trusted family members and friends seems critical to taking the first steps. These are the life preservers for someone swimming in uncharted waters.”

Given all the potential risks involved, why come out at all? The possible costs are very real, said D’Augelli, who calls the verbal bullying of LGBT youth in schools “pervasive,” adding that kids “often report that school professionals do not intervene.” A [recent study](#) of school climate nationally found that 84 percent of LGBT students reported being

verbally harassed, 40 percent reported being physically harassed and 19 percent reported being physically assaulted during the school year because of their sexual orientation.

More subtle hostility—dubbed microaggression—such as hearing the expression “that’s so gay” on a regular basis, can negatively impact LGBT youth, even those with stronger self-esteem, reminds Subasic.

Despite these challenges, the overall societal picture is continually and quickly improving for LGBT youth, says D’Augelli. “There is no evidence at all that suicides linked to sexual identity are increasing, and my guess is that they are in fact decreasing. They are very, very rare,” he added. “For the few who feel that hopeless and despondent, a campaign like ‘It Gets Better’ is very helpful.” (The project includes over 25,000 encouraging video messages, including from President Obama, viewed 40 million times.)

“There’s no doubt that coming out is a crucial event for LGBT youth,” noted D’Augelli. “Our research suggests that coming out is a major mental health booster. It takes a lot of psychological energy to hide your fundamental self from other people. Coming out lifts a veil of secrecy and can be exhilarating. It also helps the person meet other LGBT people and feel less isolated.”

It’s common for LGBT people to report feeling alone when they become aware of their sexual and gender identities, explained D’Augelli. “They think that there are no other people like them. National Coming Out Day (NCOD) proves otherwise.”

The reason for NCOD, an annual occurrence on Oct. 11 since 1989, said D’Augelli, “is to celebrate courage and strength, provide an opportunity for LGBT people to tell their stories, and demonstrate support for those who are still struggling or questioning.”

That support appears to be having an impact, noted Subasic. “Compared to 10 years ago, many more students are coming to college ‘out and proud’ and want to know what universities have to offer them and how gay-friendly the campus climate is. In fact, parents now call colleges and ask about resources for their LGBT children when evaluating a university.”

More than ever, we’re realizing that heterosexual allies are critical for LGBT people, especially the [youth](#), said D’Augelli. “Anyone who attends the NCOD rally, for instance, is ‘coming out’ as being willing to take a stand for human rights and social justice,” he noted. “And what more basic right is there than to be able to be yourself?”

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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