

Stage 1: Identity Confusion

- Start to question their attractions and face a crisis about who they are; and
- Use substances to cope with painful feelings such as anxiety and shame, to socialize or be sexual, or to block unwanted feelings of attraction.

Stage 2: Identity Comparison

- Begin entertaining the possibility that they may be gay or lesbian but continue to feel considerable anxiety and emotional pain and may continue to use substances to cope with this anxiety and pain; and
- Are vulnerable to relapse; counselors can help by encouraging clients to talk freely about their feelings.

Stage 3: Identity Tolerance

- May identify as bisexual before identifying as gay or lesbian;
- Begin to have greater commitment to a lesbian or gay identity;
- Experience an increased sense of alienation and isolation from the non-LGBT community; and
- Seek out gay and lesbian individuals and communities; counselors can help by providing information on social venues where these clients are more likely to meet abstinent people and suggest attendance at gay- or lesbian-affiliated Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings.

Stage 4: Identity Acceptance

- Assert that “I am gay or lesbian”;
- Increase contacts with other gay and lesbian individuals;
- Have experiences that help “normalize” a gay or lesbian identity and lifestyle;
- May have fragile identities and difficulty coping with non-LGBT people who do not understand their need to be with others similar to themselves; and
- May want to disclose identities to intolerant people in unsafe situations; counselors may need to encourage restraint or help clients explore the positive and negative consequences of disclosure.

Stage 5: Identity Pride

- Become more aware of the difference between their acceptance of their own homosexuality and society’s rejection of it;
- Can be angry, split the world into gay and straight, and reject the dominant non-LGBT culture;
- May become active in the gay and lesbian community and spend most of their time with other gay and lesbian people; they may intertwine drinking and community or political activities; and

- May reject non-LGBT or opposite gender counselors; listening with concern and empathy is key.

Stage 6: Identity Synthesis

- Develop awareness that “them and us” dichotomy is not valid;
- Become less angry, experience less aggressive feelings of pride, and integrate gay and lesbian identity with their other identities; and
- With a long substance abuse history may have difficulty attaining this level of synthesis.

Counselors should explore clients’ meaning of the word “out.” People who say they have been out for years may still have negative feelings about identity.