

Telling others about your gender identity

When you're a transgender person, it's not always easy to tell people about your identity. These are some tips to help you prepare.

So, you're ready to let the right people into your trans journey. Hearing them say the right pronouns will give you the assurance and acceptance you need. It took a long time to get to this point, and this next step will be the one that determines the rest of your life.

For some, this "letting in" can be a nerve-wracking experience. Before you even say, "Mum, I'm trans", you would have already gone through an entire process of self-discovery, learning, and personal growth. You would have weighed out the pros and cons, mitigated safety concerns, and considered possible problems you might face in your social transitioning. For support during this potentially difficult period, it is recommended that you find support from your LGBTQ community. If you can, seek help from a queer affirming mental health professional.

Our lives are often centred around family, culture, and religion, so there are so many nuances and layers that need to be navigated. We want to be ourselves around people we trust and love, and we also want to be ourselves at work and in public. Opening that door to let others in takes time, patience, and plenty of courage. How far are we willing to go? What price do we have to pay? What will we lose?

There's no template for a successful letting in. Each person you tell will react differently, some with immediate acceptance, some with outright resistance, and others, confusion. By being truthful and open, you've done your part. Sometimes we have to accept that others are just unwilling to accept the real you, and no matter how hard we try, they won't even meet you halfway.

Some of us who have gone through this have outlined a few key points:

1. Safety first

This is perhaps the most important part of the process. Weigh your pros and cons. Is it safe to be who you are at home and at work? How open are you on your social media accounts? Are you exposing yourself to risk? Is there anyone in your network of friends and family who is likely to react violently and/or report you to the authorities?

In some countries, there may be certain compromises that you must accept if you choose this path. For example, your documentation cannot be changed, so you may face some issues with official paperwork.

If you have considered and accepted the risks, find a network or NGO that provides support for LGBTIQ+ persons in your country.

Being safe is more important than being understood. *Nothing* is worth putting your life in danger.

2. Set your goal(s)

Ask yourself what you want from this. Is it to be called by a new name and pronouns? Is it to prepare your loved ones for the physical transition you will go through? With a fixed goal in mind, it will be easier to start the conversation. Be prepared to compromise, set boundaries, and come up with unique workarounds. For example, you can ask your friends to not use your preferred name and pronouns in front of your parents if you haven't told them yet, or don't feel safe.

3. Be VERY prepared.

Telling others that you identify as something other than what they've known you as can be difficult, especially if you grew up in a society where gender roles are strictly enforced. You can't determine how others will react, but you can make sure that all your bases are covered. Know your boundaries and when to draw the line when things get out of hand. Your safety and mental health are the most important things to consider.

Because your trans identity intersects with so many parts of your life, as you meet new people, this process is likely to be repeated. In countries where official documents do not reflect your gender identity, you'll have to tell complete strangers, like the immigration officer preparing your passport.

When telling family and friends, their first reaction is likely to be an emotional one, which can override rationality. Be open to their reactions and give them space to voice their concerns. Offer to answer their questions, regardless of how offensive they may seem. Remember that not everyone has access to information on transgenderism or SOGIESC, let alone know the etiquette around what one can or cannot ask. They may be completely clueless about LGBTIQ+ issues. Their questions may come from a place of ignorance and a genuine need to know, so be patient and provide simple and honest explanations that aren't laced with jargon. Even if they shut you out immediately, stay open and give them time to come around.

For some conservative parents, hearing you say those words can be a shock. They may go through a grieving process because to them it may feel as if they are losing a child. Give them time to process their emotions, and continue to reach out for as long as you can. They will see that you are still the same person, only much happier and more confident. You need to be prepared for many false starts. The topic may need to be brought up several times before a common ground can be established.

4. Be considerate of the timing

You don't need to throw a gender identity reveal party, but you do need to find a good time to approach the subject. In some cases, you might already start to display some noticeable physical changes, so you can only put off "the talk" for so long.

A one-on-one chat over coffee is less intimidating and more appropriate than making a grand speech at a family wedding. Perhaps you'd prefer to talk to one or two of your closest friends or family members first to gauge their acceptance. These folks can also be potential allies, acting as an intermediary in breaking the news to a family member who might not be as accepting. They might also help ease the process by being the first to use your name and pronouns (in a safe environment, or course). When others see them casually doing this, they're less likely to have a negative reaction.

This is a brief list of pointers. A helpful reference is APTN's "I think I might be Trans", a document which delves deeper into how to handle some of the questions you might face.

In the end, this journey is for you, and you only. Your happiness and wellbeing are yours alone to determine. While getting assurance and acceptance from others is important, loving yourself is the most important thing.