

## **When a friend comes out**

You're sitting opposite a friend, or a student, or a member of your youth group. You've had some chit-chat, but now he (could easily be a she) has gone quiet and is concentrating hard on stirring his cappuccino.

When he starts talking again he's hesitant, but eventually he manages to get out the words, "I'm gay." Then he looks you in the eye and waits for you to respond.

What do you say? How should you react?

The truth is, there's no formula; every person, situation and relationship is different. But there are a few simple ways you can love and serve a friend well in the moment.

### **Put yourself in their shoes.**

Think about the step your friend has just taken, and what it took for them to confide in you. You might be feeling uncomfortable or out of your depth, but your friend will almost certainly feel far more uncomfortable than you do. They've made themselves incredibly vulnerable, sharing something so personal with you. They probably thought quite carefully about sharing this with you, and have decided that they can trust you, but they've still taken a risk. They might be worried about how you'll react - will you be shocked, or angry, or disgusted? They might be worried about how it will change your relationship. And they might be worried about what you will do with the information, or who you might tell.

Trust that God has put you in this person's life to love them and to help them figure out how He feels about them. You have a special opportunity here - see it as a privilege.

### **Listen.**

Sometimes we can be so keen to explain what the Bible says about sexuality that we forget to really listen to what the other person is saying. And it's easy to assume things they haven't said. For example, when a friend says, "I'm gay," they aren't necessarily telling you they're involved in a sexual relationship. Don't assume that you know someone else's story and situation, no matter how well you know them.

Before you say anything else, listen.

After their initial revelation they might open up without any prompting, and they may well have mentally prepared what they want to say. Or you might need to ask a question to encourage them to talk, something like, "why don't you tell me some more about it?"

You might need to ask more questions. Questions are fine, as long as you're gentle and respectful. In fact, questions are a great way of showing that we're interested, that we're processing what the other person is saying, and that we're committed to them and to the conversation. So you could ask questions like, "how long have you known you were gay?" "When did you realise?" "What's it been like keeping this to yourself all this time?"

If the person is a Christian, you might want to ask them how this affects their life as a Christian.

Let them talk, and don't interrupt.

### **What should you say?**

Start by assuring your friend that things are OK. You might want to thank them for sharing something so private with you, or acknowledge that it must have been a tough thing to do. Remember that your friend is still the same person, you just know them better now - you might want to tell them that.

Exactly what you say next, and how you say it, will depend on whether your friend is a Christian or not, and whether you share the same views on what the Bible says about sexuality. But either way, talk to them about Jesus. Talk to them about how Jesus welcomes all kinds of people, and how he got into trouble for hanging out with people who everyone else considered outcasts. Tell them that Jesus cares about their struggles and their worries, and he knows what it's like to be human. Show them how Jesus died in their place so that they could be forgiven and welcomed into God's family with open arms, whoever they are and whatever they've done. Whether they are a Christian or not, they may have been given the impression that this doesn't apply to gay people, or they might struggle to believe it applies to them. Tell them about Jesus.

The Bible has lots to say about sexuality, although there is a huge amount of debate. Your friend might need help to look carefully at what the Bible says, and to pick their way through the arguments. This probably isn't the time for that, but maybe you could offer to look more carefully at what God says about sexuality another time. Just make sure you talk about Jesus.

### **Next Steps...**

As you end the conversation, assure them you're happy to talk more about this. But bear in mind that they probably won't feel comfortable bringing it up again, so you will probably have to. If you already have the kind of relationship where you can ask each other serious questions then it might be fairly easy to talk about their struggles again. If not, you might want to ask if they're happy for you to bring it up again.

Don't make this the only thing you ever talk about from now on - this is just one part of your friend's life. But, equally, don't let this be the last time you talk about it.

Be really careful what you do with the information they've given you. Let them know that you understand they've trusted you with something important, and that you'll treat it as such. If you feel like you need to share it with someone else, make sure they're OK with it.

The way you respond when a friend comes out can be really significant. But what you do next is also critical. Whatever you may have said to your friend, and however much you might have assured them of your continued friendship, they'll be waiting to find out how you'll treat them, and if anything has changed.

So think about how you can demonstrate your continued friendship. Send them a text or an email. Arrange to meet up again or let them know you're looking forward to seeing them at church or youthgroup. You don't need to talk lots about sexuality the next time you see them, but you could bring up the topic to show that it's OK to talk about it.

Basically, be cool. And keep in mind that nothing has really changed. If we know our own hearts, then we shouldn't be surprised when we hear about our friends' struggles, even if they're completely different to ours. Your friend is still your friend, they're still the same person, only now you know them better and you can love them and pray for them properly.