How can I tell my religious parents that I'm a lesbian without them disowning me? [1]

Dear Alice,

I have a question that I am very afraid to ask anyone else. I am a 21 year old college student who has been in a three year lesbian relationship with my college roommate. We are both deeply in love with each other and when it came time to tell her parents about our relationship, they were very supportive of our decision. My parents, on the other hand, are a different story. I was brought up in a very strict Roman Catholic family, where homosexuality is very much frowned upon. How can I tell my parents that I am a lesbian and make them understand without disowning me?

Sincerely,

Lesbian in Love

Answer

Dear Lesbian in Love,

What a wonderful thing to have a relationship in which you and your partner deeply love one another. Wouldn't it be great if that were all that mattered? Regardless of how strong the relationship is with your partner, it can be confusing and scary to consider sharing your feelings for her with your parents. A checklist you might create for your ideal partner may not look exactly like their checklist. While it's a relief that your partner's parents were supportive, your concerns about your parents not being as supportive or not reacting similarly are valid and not uncommon. You want to tell your parents without having them disown you. Could this realistically happen or are you worrying about a worst-case scenario? Either way, it sounds as though the prospect of revealing your true self to your parents does not feel safe. Before you disclose yourself and your relationship to them, it's wise to set up supports for yourself and carefully think through your options. For example:

- **Who can you talk with (in addition to your partner) for emotional support?:** If you haven't already, you may want to talk over the situation with friends. It might also help to reach out to your college's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) support center or student alliance, counseling service, a clergy member you trust, or other advisors you feel close with. All of these resources can help you sort through your ideas and concerns, and can support you no matter what you decide? and what
happens? If/when you speak with your parents.

- **Are there any emotional or practical reasons why the risk of telling your parents may be too great?** Would you have a place to live when school is on break? Would you have an income or other financial assistance so you can continue to pay for tuition and other expenses? Would you be able to continue speaking with siblings and other family members?

It might also help to start by focusing on what exactly you want to tell your parents, and how. Here are some questions you may want to ask yourself:

- **What do you want to say to them?** What do you want them to know about you? Do you want to tell your parents you are a lesbian or that you have intimate relationships with women, or that right now you are in a loving relationship with your partner? What terms and expressions do you feel comfortable using? What do you think will be most understandable to your parents? Do you want to explain that you are in a relationship with a person you care deeply for who is a woman, or just tell them who it is? Do you want to use the words you use with peers, or speak with your parents in another more planned way? There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, only differences in how you might feel and how your parents might receive the news.

- **How do you feel about telling your parents?** Revealing a side of yourself that you have been keeping hidden for at least three years can be overwhelming and scary, but also exhilarating and even liberating. Think about how it has felt to have this secret and how you might feel once it is out in the open. Telling your parents can have ripple effects, too. Who else might you then want to tell? Do your siblings know? Close family friends? Grandparents, aunts, uncles? What if your parents disapprove? How will you feel then and how might those feelings affect your romantic relationship? Are there other family members who will be understanding and/or can offer their support to you?

- **How would you like knowledge of your sexuality to affect your relationship with your parents?** Would you like to be closer with them in other ways? Or, maybe you’d like to establish a new kind of independence. What level of personal information is usually shared in your family?

- **What is your belief system?** You know that Roman Catholicism means a lot to your parents. How has your Catholic upbringing affected your life? Did Catholic values impact you as you realized you were attracted to women? You may decide to share some of this awareness with your parents. Speaking frankly about your beliefs and acknowledging theirs might help them to feel less like you’re rejecting their values.

- **What do you need from your parents?** Maybe you want them to know you for who you really are. Maybe you hope they’ll be okay with your sexuality and express their continued love and support. Or maybe, as some people coming out feel, you need them to express their disappointment and concerns so that you can at least stop wondering. Whatever you need, remember to be open to all of the possibilities. Your expectations might accidentally influence the tone of the conversation if you're not aware of them.

When you’re ready, talk with your parents in a setting and manner that is as calm as possible. A private setting free of distractions (such as the TV or young kids needing attention) can help. You may want to pick a time that is pre-arranged, or you may want to be spontaneous if the mood is right. If one of your parents tends to be more understanding than the other, you may want to start by introducing the topic with her or him first. For other tips related to coming out, visit the Human Rights Campaign [2]. If your parents are interested, they can seek information and support from Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Persons (PFLAG).
In addition, many religious communities are welcoming of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning people, especially in urban areas. Specific to Catholicism, Dignity USA provide links and resources which you may find useful. Perhaps you could also consider finding a church to visit together through word of mouth, a web search, or on your college campus.

It might also help to gauge your parents' current opinions by nonchalantly mentioning LGBTQ topics, television shows or movies with openly gay themes or characters, the same-sex marriage debate, etc., and starting a discussion from there.

Ultimately, you can't make your parents understand or approve of who you are. One of the hardest things to handle in life is the fact that you can't control anyone's behavior or beliefs other than your own. What you can do is think through what you feel, need, hope for, and are afraid of, as well as what your next steps will be, after the first conversation.

Good luck,

Alice!

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