

## A COMING OUT CHECKLIST

**Introduction.** The following questions are among ones that you might want to reflect upon before coming out about your crossdressing, desire to, or commitment to transitioning, undertaking a noticeable change in appearance, or anything you're unsure about revealing to others about your gender identity, expression, or sexuality. This list *isn't* exhaustive and is intended only to support some of the more common questions about coming out that many people struggle with. It has been compiled by someone who has wrestled with these questions, in the spirit of passing on what they've learned to others.

There's no one-way or necessarily right or wrong answer to these questions, and those offered aren't intended to lead you to a clear or right decision, but simply be a part of what you might want to consider. They should help you reflect on your motivations and the possible outcomes of what you decide, even if some aspects may not yet be fully clear for you.

Use your discretion if you feel some sections of this checklist aren't relevant for you. For those who are certain they want to come out, or who may be considering or are committed to transitioning or altering their appearance in some noticeable way that will become obvious to others, the questions of how and when to come out to others may often be an important first step. For others, notably crossdressers, the most pressing questions you may have in mind may be whether to come out at all, and if so, to whom.

Bear in mind that even when carefully considering the timing and extent of coming out, there can be no certainty about what might happen in reality. However, by reflecting carefully on such points can help minimise the risk of regret and your not foreseeing at least some of the possible consequences, and may help you feel more confident about taking the plunge and making your secret known. You may even find that you reach this decision without needing to consider all of the questions, but you may want to at least read through them all before taking that plunge.

*Note:* For want of better terms, the checklist uses words like 'secret,' 'unknown' and 'suppressed self' to describe the part of you that's currently unknown to others, i.e. your sexuality or gender identity that is currently "in the closet."

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### **The subject matter**

Thinking through the questions in this part should help you think about who you want to come out to, and how much you want to reveal to them, which the next sections cover in more detail.

1. What do you want to come out about?

Be as clear and detailed as you can be in your answer. For example: do you want to relate all or just aspects of your story, or is it sufficient just to say, e.g., "I occasionally like to crossdress" (or whatever it is you are opening up about)?

2. What is prompting you at this time to want to reveal this part of yourself to others? Has this prompting been more or less consistent for some time now, or is it something you're feeling especially strongly currently?

*Note:* If you're aware your urge to come out is quite sudden and in the moment, you may want to be wary about testing that it's being driven by a strong, inner sense or conviction and not, for example, by a heightened state of sexual urgency. Before making any announcements, you may at least want to reflect upon these questions carefully over a day or two, and be mindful of any state you may be in that might impair your judgment.

3. Can your need for expression and acknowledgement be satisfied by being selective in who you disclose to, or is it all or mainly about pride and/or living your authentic self, declaring to all who you are?

4. If relevant: Other than declaring who you are, what else is motivating you to come out now? What are your main motivations? (e.g. you may be prompted to want to educate others as part of a move to greater trans activism and visibility; feel that you've reached a point in your personal growth where you have the confidence and need to express your authentic self).

5. To what extent do you feel you have to present your secret self in a public, visible way, or can give expression to this with just one or a small number of people? To what extent can opening up to a larger or smaller number of people be sufficient for receiving feedback from others?

6. To what extent is your desire to present your unknown self driven by the need to express who you are? Can you achieve this without needing to receive feedback from others?

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### **Who to come out to and their possible reactions**

7. How do you feel about going fully public about your secret self, being ready to tell anybody and everybody about it, either in a "big bang" announcement, or as opportunities arise?

8. Alternatively, who do you (a) most want to and are ready to tell, (b) are comfortable telling if opportunities arise, (c) ideally won't tell, but will feel able to live with should they find out, (d) are very unsure about telling and so currently choose not to, and (e) definitely do not yet want to tell or for them to come to know your secret?

Note: You may want to work through the following questions for specific individuals or groups of people using the 'Coming Out Consequences' worksheet, available at <https://www.clivejohnsonministry.com/tmg/tmcomingout.html>.

*Coming out to those you want to, and are ready, to tell:*

9. How are each of the following likely to react to your revelation: a partner, parent, close friend, work colleague, sibling, other relative, other friends?

Note: Even with people you know very well, you may not be able to predict how they will react when disclosing to them. Among other things, and as much as you know or suspect, you might consider what kind of worldviews you know or believe them to have; how easily shocked they've been reacting to anything unexpected before; how conservative they are in their views; whether ethical, cultural, moral or religious principles or teachings are likely to influence their views; how much they've been exposed to people they regard as "different" in the past; what they consider to be outrageous behaviour, body adornments or dress; how strongly they value you for who you are, rather than who they think you are or want you to be.

10. What would be their worst case response for you? The best?

11. On a scale 0-5 (where 0=low confidence 5=very confident) §, how confident are you that they will respond as you expect, or better? What is your confidence based on?

Note: Even if you judge a worst case scenario to be likely, this might not in itself be a reason to not come out or to discourage you from continuing to explore this option. As you explore further, including with the help of this checklist, you should begin to have greater clarity and feel more comfortable about the way forward for you.

12. How do you think *you* will respond to the possible reactions of each of the following when coming out to them: a partner, parent, close friend, work colleagues, sports, religious or social groups that you're a member of, neighbours, employer, sibling, other relative, other friends and acquaintances?

Consider how you might react if they express disinterest, disgust, joy, say they've suspected/ know already, want to quickly change the conversation, or any other response you can envision. You might also want to consider the degree to which the various groups you're a member of are inclusive or exclusive of others, e.g. if relevant, noticing how someone else who's come out about

their sexuality at work been treated, or their employment been affected in any way. Bear in mind that individuals may sometimes have an “implicit bias,” that is a “fear of the other” or prejudice that they don’t recognise in themselves or speak out loud, but which can express itself in behaviours such as being stand-offish or cooler in their relationships with someone they show this bias towards. You can find out more about implicit bias at <https://www.verywellmind.com/implicit-bias-overview-4178401>.

13. Consider whether there are any individuals you might want to come out to, but who may be confused or troubled in a way that you wouldn’t want them to be (e.g. an elderly relative with fading memory who might not know how to respond to what they perceive as a changed relationship). How important is it for you to care for them and their feelings relative to your need to come out to them?

*Responding to those you’re not ready to tell who come to find out about your secret:*

14. How might you feel if others come to hear about your secret who you’ve not come out to? What might you say to them in such circumstances?

You might especially want to consider family, friends, and others who are close to you who might expect that you confide in them if you also tell others. Don’t worry if you can’t yet answer the question about what you might say, but it may be one to reflect upon before such an eventuality might arise

15. On a scale 0-5 (where 0=very unlikely 5=very likely) §, how likely do you think this is to happen?

In considering your rating, you might want to consider that if you come out only to some people, there’s always the possibility that others will get to hear your story that you don’t anticipate, with the gossip mill sometimes becoming active when a trust is betrayed, even if unintentionally. Alternatively, your rating may be lower if you consider it unlikely that, e.g. work colleagues, will be likely to learn about your secret if you’ve only opened up to a few close friends whose circles don’t overlap with those of your workmates.

16. How might you cope and take care of yourself if such a situation arises if you don’t have an opportunity to have your say, e.g. if the person refuses to engage in conversation, or in a circumstance where a large group of people like a group of work colleagues come to know, and where there’s no obvious or suitable means for letting your voice be heard? As with Q14, don’t worry if you’re unsure how to answer this question just yet.

17. Are there any particular social situations in which you would most want to present your suppressed self? Or avoid? Who might you need to come out to to allow the first of these?

Note: For those you’re unsure about telling, it may generally be best to hold off doing so until you feel more comfortable doing so. You might consider whether your reasons for hesitancy include your suspicion that the person may react negatively, or that your relationship might be endangered or changed in some unknown or undesirable way, or simply that it may confuse or unnecessarily trouble someone who may not need to know (e.g. an elderly close relative whose memory is fading).

§ Before answering these questions, you might like to consider the questions offered in the section ‘Reality check’ below, which are intended to help tease out how good or otherwise you are at predicting how others may react.

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### **Reality check: how confident are you in your ability to anticipate people’s behaviour?**

The questions in this section are intended to help you assess how good or otherwise you may be at predicting other people’s reactions (as for Q11 and Q15). You may prefer to skip these if you’re clear in your own mind on this matter.

18. To what extent do you generally find that you can anticipate how others will react in a situation? Are rarely or ever be surprised about responses and consequences to something that's said or affects those you know in a way that surprises them or may cause them discomfort, confusion or unease?

19. To what extent do you feel more or less confident about predicting the reactions of people you know especially well relative to others?

20. In considering their possible reactions, to what extent does it matter to you whether or not you're usually able to have a good instinct about someone or are able to form a "theory of mind" \* about what another person's way of thinking?

21. To what extent is your view of how they may likely respond influenced by what you hope? By your own way of seeing the world, i.e. thinking about how *you* most likely would react were you in their shoes?

22. Thinking about your general ability to tune in with others' ways of thinking and reacting, either usually finding that what you predict holds true or not, consider whether or not you want to revise your thoughts about reactions in answer to Q11 and Q15 above (if you've already considered these).

\* According to psychologist Charlotte Ruhl, **Theory of Mind** is "the ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others, understanding that others have beliefs, desires, intentions, and perspectives that are different from one's own." Many people, notably those with autistic spectrum conditions, have a blind spot in forming such theories when engaging with others, tending to believe that others will by and large think about and respond to something in a similar way to themselves. They may often not have strong self awareness—that is, not seeing how they may be perceived by others. If you'd like to read more about this concept, Charlotte has written a helpful article, available at <https://www.simplypsychology.org/theory-of-mind.html>. Sir Simon Baron-Cohen of the Autism Research Centre at Cambridge University also writes extensively on this topic. An online test that he created at <https://openpsychometrics.org/tests/EQSQ.php> may help you appreciate the degree to which you are either what he calls an 'empathizer' (having a good Theory of Mind) or 'systemizer' (more fixed in your perceptions).

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### **Expectations and reality: dealing with what you might not anticipate or expect when you come out**

23. How important is it for you that others will respond as you hope or imagine they will?

Note: bear in mind that most *won't* act exactly as you may think. Some may take time, possibly months, to come process what you tell them, although those who ultimately truly love you for who you are, normally will eventually, if not immediately. Sadly though, this hasn't been the experience of all. Many will not hear all you say to them or understand the topic either, e.g. making the false assumption that being trans invariably means that you're gay. Some explaining may be needed to help their understanding, and choosing an appropriate moment to do this.

24. How important to you will it be to follow up, explore or discuss more with those you come out to? How might you respond if they're reluctant or clearly don't want to do this?

Note: many may not want to indulge much conversation or engage beyond an initial conversation.

25. After coming out, how likely do you consider it that some who agree to indulge conversation or meeting your suppressed person are being polite, hiding what may really be uncomfortable or uncertain feelings for them? How might you make clear that you want them to let you know if they're feeling uneasy?

You may want to consider this question for specific individuals.

26. Being fully honest with yourself, how comfortable are you about possibly becoming the subject of behind the scenes gossip you don't know the full or true nature of, if you're aware of it at all? Of receiving as many unlikes as likes on social media? Of being trolled or subject to online, verbal or other abuse?

27. If you were to express your suppressed self publicly, such as going out on the street, what do you see as the joy and potential benefits that might arise from this experience? What types of feedback might you hope for (e.g. an approving look, being gendered as you would like when spoken to)?

28. How would you feel if this wasn't forthcoming? If instead, you were ostracised, abused verbally or attract unwanted attention from people you don't want to engage with?

Note: For those who are or who are considering transitioning, or undergoing any level of HRT and/or cosmetic surgery, include in your reflections the situations where you are in the process of changing your appearance, but not yet fully happy with your body image.

29. Do you believe you express different personality traits when expressing your suppressed self, relative to your current public self (e.g. become more or less confident, introverted or extroverted)? In what way, if any, do your coping mechanisms vary between these different expressions of yourself (e.g. in handling criticism)?

30. If you do express different personality traits when expressing your different selves, how might this affect relationships were you to present your suppressed self to others who think they know you well?

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### **How much do you want to reveal about your hidden person?**

This section considers what it is you want to reveal to others. You may find the 'Coming Out Consequences' worksheet useful for considering this question with different people and groups in mind (this can be downloaded at <https://www.clivejohnsonministry.com/tmg/tmcomingout.html>).

31. What is it you want others / a specific person [name each] or a group of people to know: (a) ideally, (b) as a minimum?

32. Why do you want this person / group of people to know about what you've kept secret from them? How important is this for you, irrespective of how they may react?

33. How important is it for you to be able to introduce your suppressed person to them after coming out (either in person or through photographs, etc.)?

34. How ready are they likely to be to show genuine interest in this or entertain your desire - and whether as a "one off" or more regularly?

35. How open are they in giving feedback about what they think and feel?

Note: Keep this in mind especially if it's important for you to know their true feelings if you come out to them (e.g. if they're likely to not make clear any discomfort they may feel or time they need to process the news, while you wish to disclose more).

36. How will you feel if you come out and it's clear that they don't wish to meet/learn more about your hidden self?

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### **Wider consequences**

37. Beyond what you can imagine now, what might be the wider and longer term consequences of coming out?

Try to think of as many possible possibilities as you can, including the best and worst possible outcomes as you can envision them at the moment. Remember that you may not be able to envisage everything that may result from your going public—if not in the immediate future, then further down line. For example: those of us who started using the Internet 20 or more years ago may not have appreciated the fingerprint that we were leaving and which may become more easily picked up through image searches and sophisticated filtering tools by some who may have that inclination, even for political or potential blackmail purposes, in the future. We may grown up in liberal societies in which difference is tolerated, not anticipating that much stricter regimes might come to power. We may not be able to anticipate how toxic social debate, tolerance or prejudice may become toward trans people, including discrimination in areas such as employment, access to healthcare and legal rights.

38. How comfortable or otherwise do you now feel if any or all of these came to fruition?

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### **How to come out**

39. What approach(es) feel best for *you* for coming out to (a) specific individuals, (b) groups of people? Which approach do you believe *others* would prefer? Options here might include: a face-to-face meeting, speaking online/by phone, social media, writing a card or letter, announcing in a group discussion (e.g. a relevant support group you may be a member of, such as a church house group), waiting for an opportunity that feels right (e.g. when trans issues are discussed in a TV program you're watching with someone you want to tell).

Writing a letter or card may be one approach you choose for coming out, if often being less ideal than speaking face-to-face. If you choose this option, you may wish to consider the following:

40. How will you likely feel if no feedback comes from the person receiving your letter?

41. How well do you know them to communicate on a possibly sensitive topic in this way? How might that person feel about receiving a letter out of the blue?

42. What might you want to put into writing?

Note: If you choose this approach, aim to be brief and say what you want to say quickly, recognizing that many people don't feel comfortable reading long letters.

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### **Not coming out**

To help you form a balanced view of your perception of the relative positives and risks of coming out, this sections looks at how you may feel if you *don't* come out, either now or at any time in the future.

43. If you hold off coming out now, either selectively or in a "big bang," how likely do you think it will be that you'll have regrets in the months or years to come? Why do you think this way?

44. How would you complete the sentence, "If I don't come out, then I...?" (Be selective for particular people or groups if you wish).

45. Were you to come out, to what extent do you feel that the relief of not having to hide or "dance around" your secret might compensate for any embarrassment or negative consequences you might face?

46. How likely is it that if you hold off coming out, you'll feel depressed, dissatisfied or otherwise ill-at-ease? You'll suffer otherwise?

47. To what extent is the question of coming out or not an existential one for you, i.e. it is totally at the core of your being and is crucial for your happiness and being at ease with life?

Remember that NOT coming out is always a valid option. There's no obligation to tell all or anyone about your suppressed self, nor feel any shame or lack of courage for not doing so. Don't put yourself under any pressure nor take pressure from others to reveal more than you want to and to whom you want to come out to.

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### **Carpe diem – when opportunity unexpectedly arises for coming out**

48. How confident are you that you should come out to someone or a group of people if an unexpected opportunity arises (e.g. where trans issues are being discussed informally in a social setting)?

Note: Of course, your readiness to come out in such circumstances may vary depending on who the person or group in question are. Generally, it's best not to try to engineer such situations, but let them happen naturally.

49. What would you want to say in such situations? (Remember this may be very brief).

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### **The ultimate test: the worst case scenario**

50. Reflecting back on your thinking so far, what is the worst case scenario you can imagine could result from your coming out, both in the short and the longer term?

51. Considering how strongly you need to present your suppressed self, if faced with a choice, would you rather express who you are or lose a friendship? Similarly, to what extent if it were put to the test do you hold to the belief "If people don't like who I am/accept for who I am, they can go take a hike," and to the view "I don't ultimately care what others think"? (This may be selective for different people, e.g. thinking about vulnerable family members and others whose feelings you *do* care about).

52. Can you declare "I am who I am" without needing to come out to everyone in a "big bang"?

53. Is your need to declare yourself and express yourself always or more or less continuous, rather than regular but not all the time (as may be the case when a fantasy is satisfied)? If the latter, how important to you is it that others know?

In the former case, this will likely be an important test to determine whether you pursue a course of transition or moving toward living as your preferred gender.

54. To what extent does your gut tell you what feels right about coming out? How consistent has this been over recent weeks, months or years?

55. Being fully truthful, how self assured are you? How able do you feel to stand alone, even if as an outcast and subject to taunts and criticism?

56. To what extent do you "not care" what others think, say, or do—including those you hold dear?

57. Taking everything that you've reflected on together, what do you feel you want to do? Are going to do?

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### **Final words**

Whether or not to come out about your suppressed life, to whom, when, and to what extent are questions that each of us must decide for ourselves and for which there is no one-way or necessarily right or wrong answer. There are many possible consequences, some of which can't be foreseen, although through reflecting carefully on what may arise should help you feel more confident in whatever you decide.

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