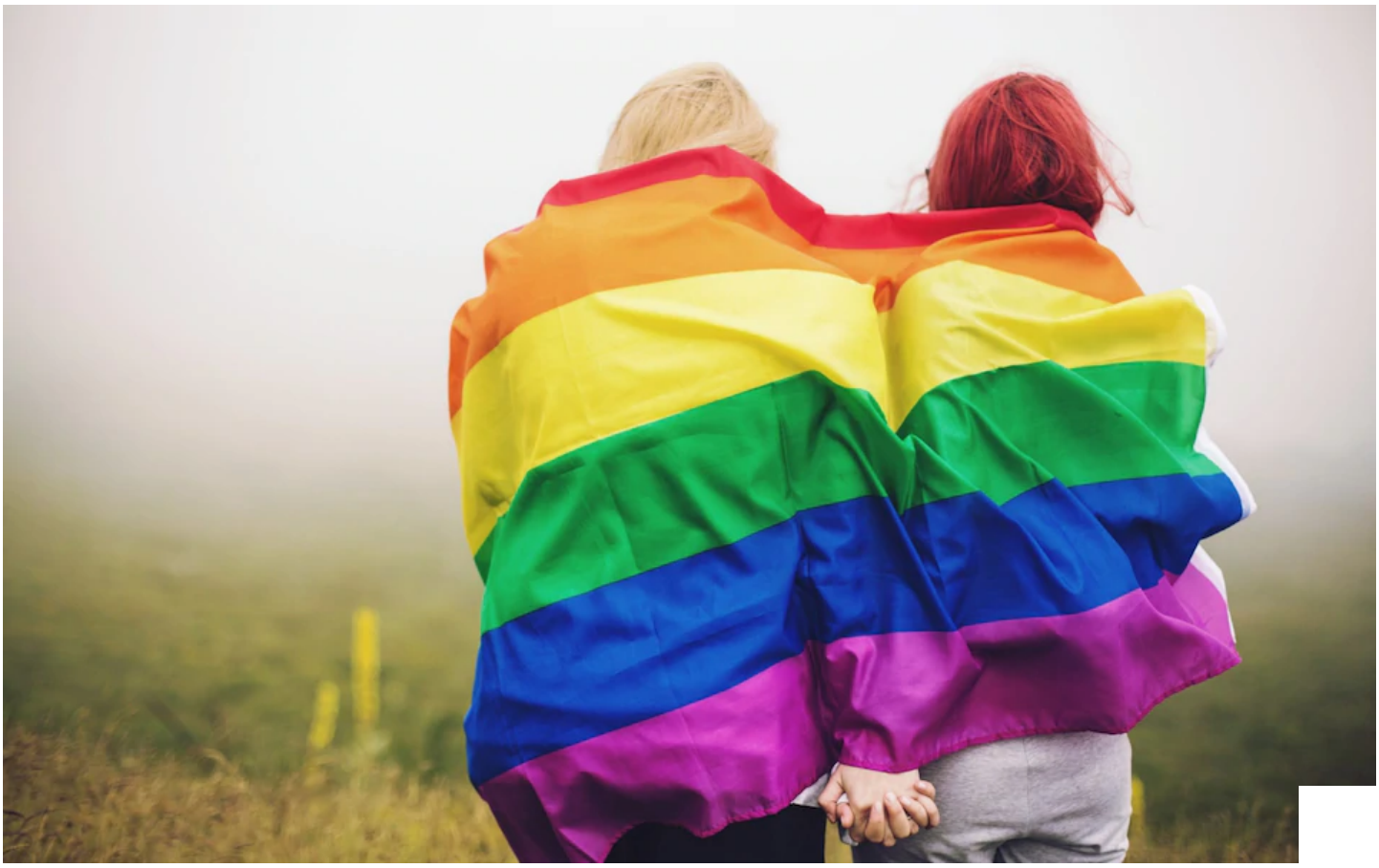

How I came out to my parents – and what happened next

Thirty-two years on from the very first Coming Out Day the world is a different place, but that doesn't make the conversation any easier

By Jack Rear
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On Oct 11 1988, when Coming Out Day was created in the USA, the world looked very different for LGBTQ people. A generation of gay men was being decimated by the Aids epidemic, there was no legal recognition of same-sex relationships and employment discrimination was rife. Despite the Sexual Offences Act 1967 having decriminalised homosexual acts, the situation was hardly different in the UK.

Despite equality being enshrined in law these days, coming out is still an emotional and often traumatic experience for those who go through it, especially when it comes to talking to close family members. The reaction of a parent to an LGBTQ child's coming out has serious effects on their future.

A soon-to-be published study from Yale University in the journal of Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity found that the children of parents whose reactions were "negative or mixed were more likely to have problems with depression, anxiety, substance use, and experiencing bullying".

"We know from research and clinical experience that a negative reaction to coming out can be very hurtful and cause lasting pain," added Dr Jeff Cohen, a psychologist at Columbia University, and one of the world's foremost experts on the psychological effects of coming out. "Family rejection is a predictor of depression and suicide among LGBTQ young people."

The right way to react to a child's coming out will depend on the child. Some of the people I spoke to while researching this article were relieved that their parents had no real reaction, while others needed reassurance.

It's also important to remember that it can be a very charged, emotional conversation, and it's OK to stumble. "When parents are mindful that their reaction did not line up with their values, there is an opportunity to apologise and repair the relationship," said Dr Cohen. "Some parents mistakenly believe they are protecting their child by denying their LGBTQ identity, so it's important to have compassion."

"The problem for some parents is the grieving for a lost future: not their child's future, but the future they've imagined," said Trevor Nesirky, who spoke to me about his daughter Frankie's coming out. "Just take your children for who they are, one step at a time. Don't look into your own future, look into theirs."

Flora Onwukwe 60, family intervention worker, Hertfordshire

'It was a relief for me that he didn't have to have this weight on him any more' said Flora Onwukwe on her son Akeil's coming out | CREDIT: John Lawrence

I remember Akeil's coming out as being quite emotional. It was Christmas Eve, and my partner and I were getting ready for a houseload of guests. Akeil was 18, home from his first term at uni, and all I could hear was him crying in the bedroom. It was awful.

His father had been diagnosed with blood cancer and we weren't sure of the prognosis, so my first thought was, "Oh my gosh, has he heard some bad news about his father?" I downed tools and came running into the bedroom and asked him what was up, and he told me he was gay.

I just thought, "Is that all? I thought you were going to tell me someone had died!"

Obviously as a mother, I'd known since he was about five that Akeil was different to other boys. It was a relief for me that he didn't have to have this weight on him any more and it helped me to make sense of all those years I'd spent protecting him from people who weren't nice to him. It was like he'd been freed to be Akeil for the first time.

I can't deny I had anxieties about it. About him being black and gay. But I never voiced them to Akeil. I guess it made me a little more protective. I think that's helped him go on and go upwards and now he's a very confident young man.

He hosts club nights for the black LGBTQ community and I've been several times and lived it large! It makes me so proud that he's putting himself out there, supporting people who need him.

No matter what he is, or what he chooses to be, so long as he's not going out committing crimes, he's my child. You don't stop loving your child because they're gay. If you know your child is a good person who you've raised to be upright and honest, why does it matter whether they're gay, trans or whatever?

Akeil is my boy, and he'll always be my boy.

Akeil Onwukwe-Adamson, 27, sportswear PR, London

Despite knowing his mum's big-hearted approach to life, Akeil still found coming out difficult | CREDIT: John Lawrence

People who know my mum are always a bit surprised when I say I was anxious about coming out to her. They know her to be an open, loving, incredible woman. But for me, the most important person to be OK with it was my mum. The 0.001 per cent chance that it would go the other way terrified me.

At the time there were these sort of Chinese whispers about me starting to fly round the family, so I knew it was time to clear the air.

I think part of me waited because I wanted to be that strong gay man who was 100 per cent comfortable and confident in who I was, and back then I wasn't. In my head the images of what a gay man could be was either Louie Spence or a very masculine lumberjack type. I didn't know whether I was the right kind of gay, I wasn't confident with my body, I wasn't confident in the way I looked. I had to come to terms with being both black and gay, because I'd never seen how those two could fit together. I was always told that I had to be one or the other, to choose which one's culture or community to go with. That was something that I was stuck with for a long time.

The nuances of being a person of colour as well as being queer are something I had to deal with in my own time, but the reaction of my mum was great because it did show me that I could breathe and lift some of that weight off my shoulders.

Trevor Nesirky, 57, healthcare manager, Offaly

Having seen the trials faced by his closeted uncle, Trevor Nesirky was determined to raise his children to know they could speak to him about anything | CREDIT: Frankie Nesirky

I had an uncle who was a “confirmed bachelor” as they’d say back in the day, and he had a picture of Rudolf Nureyev the ballet dancer on his flat wall, and all that sort of thing. He was never married. Growing up, I was very sensitive to how difficult it must have been for him to live a life like that, never being able to be honest, even to his siblings.

So that was one of the reasons we decided that we wanted to make sure we kept things open for Frankie and her four brothers.

I remember the car journey when Frankie first told me. She was really quiet, which is very unusual for her, so I knew something was amiss. It was just as we pulled up on the driveway she said, “I don’t think I like boys.”

I remember, at that moment, being absolutely aware that this was a moment that was really important to Frankie. It was one of those times as a parent where you think, "Crikey, I have to say the right thing now or it's going to be completely messed up!"

Sure, I was worried about the reaction of society in general, and the grandparents. It can be difficult for some people to understand. It's a generational thing, too, and it is difficult. But I never had a doubt that Frankie's resilience and resourcefulness would help her succeed in life and she'd get on whatever.

If your children can be honest with you about something like that then you know that they can talk to you about most things. You just have to give them a hug and tell them that you love them come what may.

Frankie Nesirky, 25, reproductive healthcare coordinator, Dublin

Frankie's coming out happened when her dad was playfully ribbing her about a boy who had a crush on her | CREDIT: Frankie Nesirky

I think I was really lucky to be brought up with really inclusive language. I was always told "if you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend when you get older" so it never really felt like one day I discovered that there were gay people or that it was OK to be gay. I think there was a bit of an internal journey of realising that I'm queer and I like women. There was never one "Eureka!" moment of me realising it, it was just this ongoing thing.

We were driving home from fencing training one evening when I was 17, and there was a boy at training who wanted to go on a date with me. Dad was saying, "Oh he's so nice, why don't you just go on a date with him?"

I know that I was really lucky with the upbringing that I've had, but in the back of my head I was acutely aware that I still might be blindsided so I'm pretty sure I just started crying when I said, "I don't think that I like boys."

I actually can't remember the exact thing that Dad said to me but I know that it was nice. It was something like, "You're just you, and that's fine. If you didn't want to go on a date with him, you could have just said."

It was a huge relief to have that complete support. I knew that I could talk to him about anything from then on, and I really have.

Ben Franklin, 26, technology PR, London

Ben's mum has become his biggest supporter, but it took some time for them to get to that stage | CREDIT: Rii Schroer

I think I first came out to my mum when I was about 11. I didn't really know that I was coming out the first time, but I remember being quite upset about it. I remember tearfully saying "I think I'm broken, I think something's wrong with me".

She explained that some people do grow up to be gay but equally that it might just be a phase. That left me with more questions than answers, really. After that it became a thing that we just didn't really talk about.

There was never a rift between me and my mum, but there was a distance in that part of my life. A lot of my mum's perception was that being gay would automatically make my

life unhappy. I remember her telling me "I think this puts you on a path to a very difficult life". That stuck with me. I really internalised that and believed to be gay was to live a life of secrecy and sadness and heartache.

I was quite badly bullied at school for being gay and I think that validated mum's fears, so her suggestion was to just not talk about it and to try fit in more.

When I moved to boarding school at 16, for the first year, I didn't tell anyone. People guessed though so I was forced to come out in my second year and the bullying started again.

My dad died when I was a teenager so naturally me and mum became closer. We had to lean on each other through that. It opened the door for us to talk about a lot more things and a lot more feelings. I remember saying to her one day, this hasn't gone away, this is still who I am and I don't think it's a phase and I don't think it's going to change.

Weirdly, that also caused a change in our relationship. When I came out in spite of horrid bullying, she realised that if I'd rather be bullied for it than live with it as a secret, then this was a part of me that I couldn't and didn't want to change.

It's only in the last couple of years I've been able to see it as a gift. It's brought more compassion into my life, and a real sense of community.

Honestly, I think my mum is a complete saint, she's one of my best friends now, but getting to that point took some hard conversations. Now that she can see I'm happy, I'm thriving, I'm successful, I have friends, I've had successful relationships, that has helped make it into a complete non-issue for her. Now she couldn't be more supportive, but that began when I made it clear that I was happy and that I wasn't going to hide it.

Michael Johnson-Ellis, 41, founder of the Modern Family Show and blogger, Worcestershire

Michael and Wes Johnson-Ellis both came out after being married to women, and then again when they became fathers to Duke, 1, and Talulah, 3 | CREDIT: Andrew Fox

I grew up during the period of Section 28 when any teaching about gay relationships in school would have resulted in the teacher being fired immediately. People just associated being gay with the AIDS epidemic.

15-year-olds weren't coming out, they were getting beaten. The only type of talk you had was people taking the piss out of you. There was no one to talk to, no support. All you knew about sexuality was masked in shame. So that was how I felt. I was ashamed of who I thought I was going to be and repulsed at myself. I felt if I spoke to my parents about it I'd just disappoint them.

I got married when I was 20 to a girl that I'd been dating for about 18 months. I felt it was something I had to do to help make the gay feelings go away. That was the thing that society and other people wanted me to do, so that's what I did. We separated within the year and after that she came back to talk about our circumstances, and that's when I came out. She was obviously upset and angry. It wasn't the explanation that she wanted but it made everything click into space for her.

Four or five months later I came out to friends and family who have supported me ever since.

Now that I'm a dad myself, I've learned that all you want is for your child to be happy and to be loved by whoever they choose to love. That's where it starts and ends. They'll love who they love and we'll support them regardless.

Wes Johnson-Ellis, 43, co-founder of The Modern Family Show and blogger, Worcestershire

Michael (L) and Wes (R) both grew up in times when being openly gay felt impossible to them | CREDIT: Andrew Fox

Living a closeted life is exhausting. What tends to happen when you live in that situation is that you're constantly on your guard around how you're being perceived. Are people are looking at you and wondering whether you're gay? Are you sounding gay? Are you acting gay? You're constantly trying to manage yourself.

I tried to live the straight life thinking that I'd be able to manage my sexuality. I genuinely believed I could suppress it to keep other people in my life happy. I don't think a lot of people comprehend the terror that you go through when you're making those decisions. When I look at how I am now and how I was then; I'm a totally different person.

Once I had got married to a woman and I had a child, I realised that I couldn't continue being unhappy, suppressing that part of myself.

I left my wife when I was about 28. I didn't tell her at the time that I was leaving because I was gay, because I wasn't ready to tell people that that was what I was. I knew that she was still young enough to meet someone else, and my daughter was only one so I didn't want my leaving the family unit to have a massive impact on her.

My mum asked me when my marriage was breaking down if I was gay and I said no. I wasn't ready to have that conversation. Unfortunately she developed a terminal illness and died a year later. I did contemplate telling her, but there was enough going on

without her having to worry about me. It was the right thing to do at the time but deep down I think she knew.

And once I met Michael and I was in a committed relationship, I told my dad. I had to tell him by text because it was the only way I could get everything down and said in the right way. It's funny because I always had a really strong relationship with my mum and not so much with my dad. We became much closer after I came out to him. He was totally fine with it. I don't think he saw it coming because I don't think he thinks like that. He's a typical guy of that generation.

The biggest relief when I talked to my dad was just that he wasn't bothered. He didn't make a big thing about it, it wasn't a huge celebration and it was just 'okay cool'. I think my advice to other parents would be: don't make an issue of it. Just acknowledge it and move on.

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