

Navigating Family Dynamics

Supporting LGBTQ+ Muslims within
Families of Origin

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Factors Impeding the Coming Out Process

There can be a variety of factors that influence your choice to come out to your family. These same factors can also make it more challenging to live life as a queer Muslim. Queer Muslims may consider the following factors when making their disclosure decisions:

- Safety
- Financial stability
- Guilt, shame, and family reputation
- Isolation, losing relationships

Queer Muslims may feel their culture's emphasis on family and honour, for example, is too powerful for their families to accept their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. At the same time, some queer Muslims find that having certain social/financial capital alleviates these pressures, such as physical distance from family.

Although these feelings are difficult, queer Muslims often still love some or all of their family members, making these experiences especially confusing and making it difficult to consider options such as leaving their families.

Experiences with Families

How a family member chooses to respond to your queerness can impact how you navigate life afterwards. It may be hard not to think of the worst-case scenario. A lack of nuanced representation of queer Muslims can make it feel as though you are alone in your experiences and may make it difficult to anticipate the types of reactions that may arise after disclosing their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

In the context of their ethno-racial and Muslim families, coming out, or disclosing one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity to others, may result in positive reactions, negative reactions, or a mix of both.

Negative Coming Out Experiences

Negative coming out experiences are often what queer Muslims think of when anticipating their families' reactions. It can be scary to think of stories we have heard, especially when these negative experiences tend to gain more traction in the media.

- Some queer Muslims get kicked out of their homes, after which many turned to trusted friends or community members for shelter
- Losing financial stability is also common, especially among younger queer Muslims who may not have a reliable income
- Getting outed by someone else is another damaging experience for some queer Muslims, as they do not get to exercise their choice to tell their family on their own terms.
- Some families ignore or deny their queer Muslim kin's disclosure, and may look to arrange marriages or "conversion therapy" to maintain their idea of their child's heterosexuality.

Positive Coming Out Experiences

Positive coming out experiences, while not widely acknowledged, do exist, and keeping them in mind when navigating whatever situation you are going through with your family may provide some solace and hope.

- Disclosure may create deeper connections between queer Muslims and their family members
- Some family members acknowledge the strength and fear that comes with disclosure, and support their queer Muslim kin's disclosure by expressing full acceptance in a very respectful and relaxed way
- Queer Muslims' understanding of "positive" disclosure experiences may vary, and to some, tolerance without getting kicked out or losing relationships exceeds their expectations

Enhancing Self-Acceptance

Everything we have discussed so far can make not only disclosure to others seem difficult, but it may also make it harder for you to accept yourself. Self-acceptance is not simply the act of being okay with who you are, which may feel impossible when the context you are in is not also changing to be more accepting. Here, we discuss the importance of family and community connections within ethno-racial, cultural, religious, and spiritual communities of belonging in encouraging self-acceptance.

Developing Independence

Independence can be a tricky arena to navigate when our ethno-racial communities are collectivistic at their core. Exploring certain self-sufficiency strategies could empower you to disclose (or live more comfortably and authentically) without fear of your safety and security being jeopardized.

- Queer Muslims find that, with age, they are slowly branching out beyond the imagined futures their families placed on them, which is filled with exciting choices
- Moving out and gaining financial stability, while not feasible for many, helps some queer Muslims develop their identities on their own terms
- Pursuing a passion, such as higher education or a particular hobby of interest, helps some queer Muslims reinvest in their communities

Engaging in Advocacy

Advocating for yourself and others (queer Muslims and other marginalized groups) is a powerful way of exercising agency. Working with community to demand safer and happier futures for queer Muslims can help alleviate those negative experiences for others, and may help you in developing your own identity.

- Some queer Muslims who have more openly disclosed their identities may feel a sense of responsibility to advocate for themselves and others by constantly being engaged in advocacy communities on social media or in person at protests and rallies.
- Queer Muslims who are not out to family members also engage in advocacy in more subtle ways, such as challenging gender norms in the home

Maintaining Boundaries

Establishing boundaries, in both subtle or more apparent ways, can be a great way to care for your mental health and well-being.

- Queer Muslims who establish some form of independence or life outside the status quo find that some family members turn to them when facing other challenges due to similar norms, which may become too laborious for them. Kindly letting these family members know about your own capacity to support them can be a helpful boundary
- Some queer Muslims set a hard boundary of not having kin who do not support them in their lives. While difficult, it does work for those who typically have that independence, and it gives them space to grow in a supportive environment

Developing Supportive Relationships

Surrounding yourself with people who support, affirm, and uplift you falls in line with the community-centered values of many Muslim communities, and it can act as a buffer against Islamophobia and racism in society. These loving relationships, both within your biological/chosen family and outside it, can also affirm your identities by offering a healing space.

- Some queer Muslims locate others who share similar identities using online platforms, and find that these relationships support the individual's own journey because they are able to bond over similarities in their experiences
- Finding supportive elders in the queer and/or Muslim communities gives some queer Muslims a role model to turn to and seek advice or comfort from

Engaging with Affirming Social Services

With the variety of social services out there, it can feel defeating when engaging with those who do not recognize and support your entire intersectional identity. Seeking social services which affirm queer Muslims helps with one's self-acceptance by accurately identifying and addressing their needs.

- Queer Muslims may not find the resources they need in their current cities or provinces, which makes some feel isolated and/or unrepresented
- Some social services help queer Muslims reconceptualize their understandings of legitimate queerness by proxy of coming out. Centering ethno-cultural values important to the individual makes these social services more accessible.
- Finding social service providers with similar identities helps queer Muslims navigate their experiences and feel confident that this support is coming from someone who is familiar with their experiences

FURTHER READING

If you would like to learn more about these topics and find out what resources or supports are available in your area, check out the following options!

Books:

An Arab Melancholia

by Abdellah Taïa

We Have Always Been Here: A Queer Muslim Memoir

by Samra Habib

Resources:

Faith in Our Families: Talking About Faith, Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression

by PFLAG

Homosexuality is Not a 'Test' From Allah

by Junaid Jahangir

A Muslim Mental Health Response to Homophobia

by MuslimMentalHealth.com

Community/Social Groups and Organizations:

Salaam Canada

Masjid el-Tawhid / The Unity Mosque

Queer Muslim Network Toronto

MASGD

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In July 2022, Salaam Canada shut down its operations as a national organization.