Coming out to family carries fear of rejection

PART 4
Coming out: Life on families

you when you have been rejected by your parents because that's a hard thing to take. It's devastating. It hurts your self-esteem. You think you are as much a person as everyone else. But then you have that support group of people who think you are important and have dealt with those feelings of eminence and self-worth. One of the problems parents have is that they don't expect it in their own children. Jennifer said, "No parent pictures their child growing up like this," she said, "and there is always that feeling of guilt that they did something wrong in raising you." But the only way to get over those feelings, she said, is by talking about them. "Since they won't talk about it, I'll talk about it," she said. "I have this fear that they will never come to terms with it, that I will never be able to see through it and that there will always be this wall between us." Patience and understanding are two important qualities in breaking down that wall, said she. "It's not just the talking," she said, "it's the listening... It's frustrating waiting for my parents to be able to listen to me, but I am able to wait because I do understand. I can relate my own feelings to theirs because I went through the same phases." Those phases include denial, fear, and anger. "I don't think of you as a "normal" person," she said. "I think of you as someone who has something wrong with them." Catherine said, "I don't want to be treated like a "normal" person."

Emotions and understanding are two important qualities in breaking down that wall, she said. "It's not just the talking," she said, "it's the listening... It's frustrating waiting for my parents to be able to listen to me, but I am able to wait because I do understand. I can relate my own feelings to theirs because I went through the same phases." Those phases include denial, fear, and anger. "I don't think of you as a "normal" person," she said. "I think of you as someone who has something wrong with them." Catherine said, "I don't want to be treated like a "normal" person."

Another student had different experiences when they came out to their families. Robert, a bisexual, decided to come out to his family during a vacation when they were able to slow down enough to really talk things through, he said. It was actually a relative who first asked him about his sexuality, he said, and when he came out to that person a year and a half ago he also came out to himself. He said "Since that initial experience he said he has found it important to come out to as many people as possible, he said. "It was a very uplifting experience," he said. "I just didn't want to be stifled by society anymore."

"Once you realize you've been brainwashed you want to de-program everyone else, too," Robert said. His mother was the hardest person for him to come out to, and that she was shocked when he first told her. "She had lesbian friends before," he said, "and had been friends with gay men, but it was different when it was her own son." She has since been accepting and understanding, he said.

Robert's stepfather was incredibly accepting from the beginning, he said. "He had a close member of his family who was gay and he looked up to him," Robert said. "He inquires about who I'm dating and how things are going. It's great." Michael's parents found out he was gay when they found a letter written to him by one of his friends that mentioned he was going to be coming out at the time. He said his father asked him about it and that since then has become more accepting, but his mother has not.

"It is definitely much harder to tell people who think they really know you when they really don't," Michael said. One of the things Michael said he has learned since coming out to his parents is that you try to predict how certain people will react so you are better able to explain things to them, he said. "One of the things I always remind the people I come out to is that I am still the same person I was before I came out," he said. "I think that really makes it easier for people to grasp."

Catherine, a lesbian, came out to her mother at last fall and knowing how long it took her to come to terms with her sexuality herself, she said she is giving her mother time do the same.