

INTO ACCOUNT

SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS + ALLIES

Closeting, Secrecy, and Shame

Let's talk about closeting, secrecy, and shame. Life in the closet, or closeting, is living with one or more parts of your identity unknown to one or more people in your life. But how and why does closeting work, and how does it interact with secrecy and shame?

- For some people, closeting is a matter of life or death. They have friends, family, church, or community members who are violently bigoted, and would physically harm them or remove their access to life-sustaining resources like shelter, food water, health care, mental health care, and more.
- For some people, closeting is a matter of reducing significant challenges that could deeply impact their life. They could lose a job, custody, significant support systems, or other things that would not immediately result in their physical harm or death, but that would cause significant trauma or harm.
- For some people, closeting is a matter of convenience. They could lose a re-election campaign, a plum acting role, their great Uncle Jim's inheritance, or something similarly of value to them that would not threaten their life, physical or mental health, would not cause significant harm or trauma, but may change the material conditions of their life in some difficult way.
- For some people, the cost is unknown or unpredictable. Their job, family, and support systems are loving or progressive with a mixture of conservative or indifferent. It's simply difficult to predict whether there would be consequences.
- For some people, there are no or very few material harms that would come from outing, either to everyone or to select people or groups, but there is significant fear or shame because of societal norms, upbringing, or for other reasons.

This brings up a lot of difficult questions. In what different ways does outing harm people with different needs and experiences? Can someone outside the individual ever know where they fall on the closeted spectrum from safety to convenience to no material consequence?

- Closeting can impact people other than the closeted individual for several reasons
 - Someone/s outside is aware of the closeted individual's hidden identity and is/are asked to protect the hidden identity from some or all others.
 - Someone/s is dating the closeted individual and is/are asked to also protect the hidden identity from some or all others.
 - A large group of people share that identity, come together around that identity, some are out and some closeted, and all are asked to protect the hidden identity outside of the group.
- Consent comes into play when closeted individuals ask others to help protect a hidden identity. A generally accepted ethical lens is that anyone asked to protect a hidden identity consent to do so, or choose to no longer engage with the closeted person or no longer engage with a group that has all closeted folks or a mix of closeted and uncloseted folks.
- Mixed closeted/uncloseted relationships can be very complex, whether one-on-one, small groups, or large groups. The larger the group, the larger the chance of intentional

or accidental outing for closeted individuals. Trying to negotiate consent with large groups of people can be difficult. Strategies include:

- Creating relational agreements around protecting each other's hidden identities
- Use of pseudonyms in group spaces
- Intentional separation of lives between out spaces and closeted spaces (closeted spaces are sometimes referred to as the "vanilla world," the "muggle world," the "world of normies")
- Consequences for members who fail to protect another person's hidden identity.
- Because closeting is a spectrum from safety, to convenience, to fear or shame with no material consequence, outing can be taken more or less seriously by various members of a group. In addition, groups can come to trust each other or a community can be so small that strategies to reduce outing are relaxed or limited, and folks learn each other's given names and/or connect in both closeted and un-closeted spaces.
- If intentional or accidental outing happens, this can tighten either one-on-one, small group, or large group strategies to reduce outing, which can lead to toxicity, fear, and paranoia.
 - Group or relational agreements tighten and become strict or controlling
 - Consequences for transgressions, whether in private or public spaces, are increased, applied more broadly, and/or aimed at already marginalized members
 - Trust decreases and people start operating with increased fear of others, sowing group discord, animosity, and targeting of people identified (correctly or incorrectly) as threats
 - Threat or reality of blurring between closeted and uncloseted lives feels intense, frightening, and imminent
- In particular in a mixed closeted and uncloseted relationship or group, the differences among closeted to all, closeted to some, and uncloseted people feels unfathomably wide, and it is more likely there will be group discord, animosity, and chaos.
- Outing can become the underlying fear in every conflict, superseding other legitimate concerns. People who are seen to have a problem with the group - including things like asking the group to address its own racism, sexism, homophobia, queerphobia, sexualized violence, or abuse of power, become seen as people who may become so angry or disillusioned with the group that they will out members as a result.

Summary: The interplay of differing consequences and stakes regarding outing and closeting can come together to create atmospheres of toxicity, secrecy, shame, ostracization, and cyclical conflict. The fear, and even sometimes paranoia, around outing can reach a fever pitch that out-shouts any other harm, violence or oppression that needs to be addressed. Any uncloseted person speaking openly about other uncloseted people or groups can be seen as threats and/or accused of outing. Anyone who is uncloseted and expresses criticism is ostracized, regardless of whether it's someone with far more intersectional identities experiencing deep harm from the community.

It can become very difficult to untangle the threads of violence, secrecy, shame, and harm and trace them back to their sources.