

# Being an Ally for LGBT Individuals

These are some guidelines for people desiring to be allies for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered individuals. In today's world, LGBT issues are being discussed more than ever before. The discussions taking place in the media, in classrooms, in churches, in offices, on the streets and in people's homes are often highly charged and emotional. This can be a scary topic and confusing to people on a very personal level. Being an ally is important, but it can be challenging as well as exciting. This list is by no means exhaustive, but provides a starting point. Add your own ideas and suggestions.

- ***Don't assume heterosexuality.*** In our society, we generally assume that everyone we meet is heterosexual. Often people hide who they really are until they know they are safe to come 'out'. Use gender-neutral languages when referring to someone's partner if you don't know the person well. In general, be aware of the gender language you use and the implications this language might have. Also, don't assume that transgendered individuals are gay or lesbian!
- ***Educate yourself about LGBT issues.*** There are many resources available, reading lists and places to go for information. Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- ***Explore ways to creatively integrate LGBT issues in your work.*** Establishing dialogue and educating about LGBT issues in the context of your other work can be a valuable process for everyone regardless of sexual orientation or gender. Integration of LGBT issues into work you are doing instead of separating it out as a separate topic is an important strategy to establishing a safe place for people to talk about many issues in their lives.
- ***Challenge stereotypes*** that people may have about LGBT individuals as well as other people in our society. Challenge derogatory remarks and jokes made about any group of people. Avoid making those remarks yourself. Avoid reinforcing stereotypes, myths and prejudices.
- ***Examine the effect sexual orientation and gender have*** on people's lives and development. Identify how race, religion, class, ability and gender intersect with sexual orientation and how multiple identities shape our lives.
- ***Avoid the use of heterosexist language,*** such as making remarks implying that all people of the same gender date or marry members of the other gender. Respect how people choose to name themselves. Most people with a same sex or bisexual orientation prefer to be called gay, lesbian or bisexual people rather than homosexual. 'Queer' is increasingly used by some gay, lesbian or bisexual people (especially in the younger generations), but don't use it unless you are clear that it is okay with that person. If you don't know how to identify a particular group, it's okay to ask.

- ***Don't expect members of any population that is the target of bias*** (e.g. gays, Jews, people of color, women, people with disabilities) **to always be the 'experts'** on issues pertaining to their particular identity group. Avoid tokenizing or patronizing individuals from different groups.
- ***Encourage and allow disagreement*** on topics of sexual and gender identity and related civil rights. These issues are very highly charged and confusing. If there isn't some disagreement, it probably means that people are tuned out or hiding their real feelings. Keep disagreement and discussion focused on principles and issues rather than personalities and keep disagreement respectful.
- ***Remember that you are human.*** Allow yourself to not know everything, to make mistakes and to occasionally be insensitive. Avoid setting yourself up as an 'expert' unless you are one. Give yourself time to learn the issues and ask questions and to explore your own personal feelings. If you think you have no prejudices, it might be a good idea to spend some time reflecting on that issue. To be human is to have prejudices. Recognizing our own bias is the first step in eliminating it.
- ***Ask for support*** if you are getting harassed or problems are surfacing related to you raising issues around sexual orientation and gender identity. Don't isolate yourself in these kinds of situations and do try to identify your supporters. You may be labeled as gay, lesbian or bisexual, whether you are or not. Use this opportunity to deepen your understanding of the power of homophobia and heterosexism. Make sure you are safe.
- ***Prepare yourself for a journey of change and growth*** that will come by exploring sexual and gender identity issues, heterosexism and other issues of difference. This can be a painful, exciting and enlightening process and will help you to know yourself better. By learning and speaking out as an ally, you will be making the world a safer, more affirming place for all. Without knowing it, you may change or even save people's lives.
- ***Don't be discouraged when change does not happen overnight.*** The homophobia and heterosexism in our society and throughout the world are the result of hundreds of years of misunderstanding and fear. You may feel that once you come to truly understand the issues, the rest of the world will immediately follow suit. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Change sometimes happens more slowly than we would like, and sometimes occurs in very small steps. Take time to celebrate the small victories along the way. They each make a difference.