

Being An Ally

Four Levels in Ally Development

1. **Awareness:** It is important to become more aware of who you are and how you are different from and similar to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

Strategies to do this include:

- Conversations with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals
- Attending awareness building workshops such as the Safe Zone training
- Reading about LGBTQ issues
- Self-examination

2. **Knowledge/Education:** You must begin to, and continue to, acquire knowledge about sexual orientation and gender identity and what the experience is for LGBTQ persons in society and your campus community.

You can do this by:

- Learning about laws, policies and practices and how they affect the LGBTQ person
- Educating yourself about LGBTQ cultures and norms of your community
- Contacting local and national LGBTQ organizations for information.
- Utilizing the educational materials and resources on the Safe Zones Web site and other websites of LGBTQ organizations
- Reading LGBTQ publications
- Attending LGBTQ events on campus and in the community

3. **Skills:** You must develop skills in communicating the knowledge that you have

You can do this by:

- Attending workshops such as Safe Zone continuing education events
- Role playing situations with friends
- Developing support connections
- Practicing interventions or awareness raising

4. **Action:** Action is, without a doubt, the only way that we can affect change in society as a whole, for, if we keep our awareness, knowledge, and skills to ourselves, we deprive the rest of the world of what we have learned, thus keeping them from having the fullest possible life.

You can do this by:

- Supporting LGBTQ students and colleagues
- Actively working to support social justice and equality for all people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity
- Challenging homophobia/biphobia/transphobia and heterosexism

Qualities of Allies

An ally:

- is an advocate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people
- has worked (or is currently working) to develop an understanding of heterosexism and transphobia
- chooses to align with LGBTQ people and responds to their needs
- believes that it is in her or his self-interest to be an ally
- expects support from other allies
- is able to acknowledge and articulate how patterns of oppression have affected his/her life
- is a “safe person” for someone who is gay, lesbian or bisexual to speak with. This means that one is committed to providing support and to maintaining confidentiality. This commitment extends to people with a gay, lesbian or bisexual roommate, friend or family member who may wish to speak with someone.
- can refer someone to another ally if they feel they can’t assist them with their particular concern
- expects to make some mistakes but does not use it as an excuse for non-action
- knows that an ally has the right and ability to initiate change through personal, institutional, and social justice
- tries to remain aware of how homophobia and other oppressions exist in her or his environment
- does not put down other groups of people on the basis of their race, religion, culture, gender, social status, physical appearance, or physical or mental abilities
- speaks up when a homophobic joke or stereotype is related and encourages discussions about oppression, or looks within herself or himself to unlearn the “myths” that society has taught
- promotes a sense of community and knows that he or she is making a difference in the lives of others

(Source: Shawn-Eric Brooks 1990 and CMU Allies:

Ten Ways to Be an Ally

1. Don’t assume everyone is heterosexual. Be aware that transgender and intersexed people exist.
2. Do not ever “out” someone. Just because you might know, don’t assume that others do.
3. Avoid anti-gay jokes and conversations.
4. Create an atmosphere of acceptance.
5. Use all-inclusive language. Use “partner” instead of “boyfriend” or “girlfriend.”
6. Actively pursue a process of self-education. Read and ask questions.
7. Acknowledge and take responsibility for your own socialization, prejudice, and privilege.

8. Educate others through one-on-one discussions, group programming, and utilizing teachable moments.
9. Interrupt prejudice and take action against oppression even when people from the target group are not present.
10. Have a vision of a healthy, multicultural society.

(Source: Delta Lambda Phi Fraternity)

Benefits of Being an Ally

Becoming less locked into sex roles and gender stereotypes.

Helping the lives of members of the LGBTQ community.

Making a difference in the campus environment.

Relieving oppression – oppression impacts everyone.

Supporting your friend, classmate, student roommate, teammate, brother, sister, colleague, mother, father, other peers, and other people you know who are LGBTQ.

Developing stronger self-esteem and lowering occurrences of depression, abuse of drugs and alcohol, and suicide.

Guidelines for Allies

These are some guidelines for people wanting to be allies for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people. In today's world, LGBTQ issues are being discussed more than ever before. The discussions are often highly charged and emotional and can be a scary 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 language when referring to someone's partner if you don't know the person well. Be aware of the gender language you use and the implications this language might have.

Educate yourself about LGBTQ issues. There are many resources available, including reading lists, books, and videos available from the SDSU Pride Resource Office. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

Educate yourself on transgender and intersex issues.

Do not assume that everyone falls into the two categories of male/man and female/woman.

Explore ways to creatively integrate LGBTQ issues in your work. Establishing dialogue and educating about lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues in the context of your other work can be a valuable process for everyone regardless of sexual orientation. Integration of lesbian, gay and bisexual 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 lesbians, gays and bisexuals, 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 and prejudices.

Examine the effect sexual orientation has 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 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. ("How do you define your sexuality? Do you like to use certain terms over others?")

Don't expect members of any population that is a target of bias (e.g. gays, Jews, people of color, women, and 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 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 not to 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.

Ask for support if you are getting harassed or problems are surfacing related to your raising issues around sexual orientation and gender identity. Don't isolate yourself in these kinds of situations and 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 identity issues, heterosexism, transphobia 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.

(Source: "Being An Ally For Lesbians, Gay Men And Bisexuals."
Metropolitan State College of Denver)

Making Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Inclusive Assumptions

When you are interacting with people whose sexual orientation is unknown to you:

DON'T: Assume all mothers/fathers are heterosexual.

DO: Assume that a parent might be heterosexual or a lesbian or gay man.

DON'T: Assume when interacting with a "single" adult, that person's only "family members" are parents, siblings, grandparents, etc.

DO: Assume that any "single" person might be involved in a life-long committed relationship with a same sex partner who is as much a "family member" as a husband or wife.

DON'T: Assume that all children live in families consisting of the child and a male-female couple or the child and a single parent.

DO: Assume any child might live in a family consisting of the child and a single parent, the child and an opposite-sex couple, or the child and a same-sex couple.

DON'T: Assume that the term "women" refers only to heterosexual women, and that the term "men" refers only to heterosexual men.

DO: Include lesbians in your use of the generic "women" and gay men in your use of the generic "men", for example in a discussion of women's sexuality include relating with same-sex and opposite-sex partners, or in a list of organizations for fathers include groups for gay fathers.

DON'T: Assume that everyone will find male-female sexually suggestive imagery erotic, or that everyone will find banter about male-female sexual intrigue funny or playful.

DO: Assume that in any group of people, it is highly likely that there is at least one person who is much more interested in same-sex imagery and intrigue.

DON'T: Assume all sexually active women use birth control.

DO: Assume that a sexually active woman might have either a male or female sexual partner;

(GLB Manual, Western Michigan University)