

A Beginners Guide To Becoming A GLBT Ally

Adapted from The Ohio State H.E.R.O. (Heterosexism Education and Reduction Orientation) Ally Handbook by B. Beemyn and V. Valentine

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Good Guidelines For Ally Development Workshops

Be Here Now

Make this workshop your job for the day. Please turn off cell phones and beepers and try not to leave the room to do work-related business.

Confidentiality

Whatever is said in this room should stay in this room. Please feel free to share your own experiences, insights, and feelings about the workshop with others, but don't share other participants' comments without their consent.

Amnesty

It is often difficult to participate in a workshop when colleagues and/or supervisors are also involved. For this reason, we ask that information shared in this room not be used outside of the workshop.

Participate, Don't Dominate

This workshop will be most successful if we have the participation of everyone in the room. Please be mindful of other people as you share your insights and opinions throughout the course of the workshop.

Use "I" Statements

Everyone's learning is enhanced when we share our own experiences and speak from a personal perspective. Don't expect someone to represent or speak on behalf of an entire group of people.

Be Mindful of Judgments

We are all at different awareness levels when it comes to issues of oppression. Please be supportive and non-judgmental of other people as we explore this topic together.

Treat Others with Respect

Being treated with respect not only means politeness, but also using the appropriate language to refer to GLBT people, such as saying "lesbian and gay" rather than "homosexual," and "crossdresser" rather than "transvestite."

Be Open to Changing Your Mind

There is a possibility that you may hear information that is contrary to what you currently believe about this topic. In fact, this topic may be difficult for many participants. Please allow yourself to be challenged during the workshop.

Have Fun

Learning and sharing should be fun. Laughter and enjoyment are not only allowed, but encouraged!

What Is Heterosexual Privilege?

If you are heterosexual (or, in some cases, simply perceived as heterosexual):

- ◆ you can go wherever you want and know that you will not be harassed, beaten, or killed because of your sexuality (sixteen people were known to be murdered in 2000 because of being perceived as gay, 29 were killed in 1999, and 26 in 1998)
- ◆ you do not have to worry about being mistreated by the police or victimized by the criminal justice system because of your sexuality
- ◆ you can express affection (kissing, hugging, and holding hands) in most social situations and not expect hostile or violent reactions from others
- ◆ you are more likely to see sexually-explicit images of people of your sexuality without these images provoking public consternation or censorship
- ◆ you can discuss your relationships and publicly acknowledge your partner (such as by having a picture of your lover on your desk) without fearing that people will automatically disapprove or think that you are being “blatant”
- ◆ you can legally marry the person whom you love
- ◆ you can receive tax breaks, health and insurance coverage, and spousal legal rights through being in a long-term relationship
- ◆ you can express yourself sexually without the fear of being prosecuted for breaking the law (sodomy laws are still enforceable in 16 states and are used to deny civil rights to lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals)
- ◆ you can be assured that your basic civil rights will not be denied or outlawed because some people disapprove of your sexuality (for example, in 1998, Maine voters repealed a state law protecting the rights of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals)
- ◆ you can join the military and be open about your sexuality
- ◆ you can expect that your children will be given texts in school that implicitly support your kind of family unit and that they will not be taught that your sexuality is a “perversion”
- ◆ you can approach the legal system, social service organizations, and government agencies without fearing discrimination because of your sexuality

- ◆ you can raise, adopt, and teach children without people believing that you will molest them or force them into your sexuality. Moreover, people generally will not try to take away your children because of your sexuality
- ◆ you can belong to the religious denomination of your choice and know that your sexuality will not be denounced by its religious leaders
- ◆ you can easily find a neighborhood in which residents will accept how you have constituted your household
- ◆ you know that you will not be fired from a job or denied a promotion because of your sexuality
- ◆ you can work in traditionally male- or female-dominated occupations without it being considered “natural” for someone of your sexuality
- ◆ you can expect to see people of your sexuality positively presented on nearly every television show and in nearly every movie
- ◆ you can expect to be around others of your sexuality most of the time. You do not have to worry about being the only one of your sexuality in a class, on a job, or in a social situation
- ◆ you can act, dress, and talk as you choose without it being considered a reflection on people of your sexuality
- ◆ if you were to commit a sexual crime (such as rape or incest), it would not be viewed as a direct result of your sexuality
- ◆ you can teach about lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals without being seen as having a bias because of your sexuality or forcing a “homosexual agenda” on students

How Homophobia Hurts Everyone

You do not have to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual, or know someone who is, to be negatively affected by homophobia. Though homophobia actively oppresses lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, it also hurts heterosexuals.

- Homophobia inhibits the ability of heterosexuals to form close, intimate relationships with members of their own gender for fear of being perceived as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
- Homophobia locks people into rigid gender-based roles that restrict creativity and self-expression.
- Homophobia pushes heterosexual men to constantly prove their masculinity.
- Homophobia results in “lesbian baiting” (an accusatory charge of lesbianism) being used to control women’s autonomy and to question their femininity.
- Homophobia is often used to stigmatize heterosexuals who are perceived by others as lesbian, gay, or bisexual or who are a friend or relative of someone who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
- Homophobia compromises human integrity by pressuring people to treat others badly, actions that serve to diminish their basic humanity.
- Homophobia, combined with sexual taboos, results in the invisibility or erasure of the lives and sexuality of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals in school-based sex education discussions, keeping vital information from students. Such erasures can contribute to the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.
- Homophobia deters individuals from taking part in certain social activities. People who are heterosexual are discouraged from participating in lesbian- and gay-identified activities for fear of being labeled.
- Homophobia pressures young people to become heterosexually active to prove to themselves and others that they are “normal.” This premature sexual involvement can result in emotional distress, as well as increases the chance of teen pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

- Homophobia prevents some lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals from developing an authentic self-identity and adds to the pressure to marry. This can be traumatic not only for themselves, but also for their heterosexual spouses and children, should they feel compelled to get married.
- Homophobia inhibits appreciation of other types of diversity, making it unsafe for everyone, because each person has unique traits not considered mainstream or dominant. We are all diminished when any one of us is demeaned.

By challenging homophobia, people are not only fighting the oppression of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, but are also striving for a society that accepts and celebrates the differences in all of us.

For more information about this topic, see Warren J. Blumenfeld, *Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992)

A Model of Heterosexual Ally Development

Status 1: Pre-Contact (Non-Identification)

Heterosexual individuals in this status will have some awareness of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals because of popular culture and the media, but they will not have close contact with an openly GLB person(s). They will believe that heterosexuals and heterosexual relationships are superior to GLB people and their relationships. They will have very negative attitudes toward GLB people and not identify as an ally.

Status 2: Contact* and Retreat

Heterosexual individuals in this status have contact with a family member, friend, or coworker who has come out to them. This personal contact leads to a discovery that GLB people are “normal” human beings. Some heterosexuals may experience a hyper-vigilance or be focused on associations with GLB people, which leads to a close relationship with members of the GLB community. Personal contact enables a transition to Status 3, which is characterized by an increase in awareness and knowledge and a reduction in negative attitudes.

Retreat: A heterosexual person can become essentially closed to GLB people and issues and retreat to Status 1 for a variety of reasons, including adherence to non-inclusive religious and cultural beliefs and conformity to traditional gender roles.

* Some heterosexual people may begin to identify as an ally (Statuses 3 and 4) without this personal contact as a result of becoming more liberal, developing less restrictive religious beliefs, or wanting to help others. They will eventually experience Status 2, enabling them to develop fully as allies.

Status 3: Internal Identification

Heterosexual individuals in Status 3 and 4 begin to develop a positive identity as an ally to GLB people. Individuals in Status 3 do not publicly identify as an ally, but do have greater contact with members of the GLB community and with heterosexual people who identify as allies (individuals in Status 4). They will begin to realize the importance of being supportive of GLB people and begin to show this support in a limited way. They will possess less negative attitudes toward GLB people and a higher level of awareness and knowledge.

Status 4: External Identification

Heterosexual individuals in this status will take pride in being an ally to GLB people, because they realize how much fuller their lives are as a result of knowing openly GLB people. Among the characteristics of individuals at Status 4 are respect and appreciation for people of different sexual orientations, low negative attitudes and a high level of awareness and knowledge, and demonstrated support for GLBT people. They will know other allies among their friends, family, and colleagues, but may feel alienated from non-allies.

Adapted from Kerry Poynter, 1997

Myths and Realities of GLBT Life

▼ **Children raised by lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals are more likely to become gay. FALSE**

Numerous studies have found that children raised by gay and lesbian parents are not more likely to identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual as adults than children raised in heterosexual families. Research also demonstrates that there are no differences between the children in intelligence, psychological and social adjustment, and popularity with friends. Some studies show that children with gay/lesbian parents are more accepting of diversity.

▼ **The majority of child molesters are gay men. FALSE**

Very few gay men molest children. Research indicates that about 95% of child molestation is committed by heterosexual men. The overwhelming majority of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals are interested in other adults, not children.

▼ **Most trans people identify as lesbians or gay men. FALSE**

Gender identity (how someone perceives their own gender) is a different concept than sexual identity. Transgendered individuals identify across the sexual-orientation spectrum, and in fact, studies show that the majority of crossdressers are heterosexual men.

▼ **“Homosexuality” is unique to humans and is not found elsewhere in nature. FALSE**

Same-gender sexual behavior has been scientifically documented as a normal, regular occurrence among nearly 300 species of mammals and birds, including chimpanzees, dolphins, elephants, squirrels, geese, and bears.

▼ **There are few actual bisexuals; most people will eventually identify as either completely lesbian/gay or heterosexual. FALSE**

Many people identify as bisexual all of their lives. There are probably as many bisexuals as there are gay men and lesbians. However, bisexuals frequently go unrecognized because they are seen as heterosexual when they are in relationships with people of another gender, and as lesbian or gay when in relationships with those of the same gender.

▼ **Being lesbian or gay is a type of mental illness and can be cured with appropriate psychotherapy. FALSE**

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed “homosexuality” from its list of mental disorders, and in 1975 it stated that “homosexuality, per se, implies no impairment in judgment, stability, reliability, or general social or vocational capacities.” Although several “ex-gays” have become prominent in the mainstream media in recent years, very few gay people desire or are able to change who they are. Even many “ex-gays” admit that they continue to have attractions to people of the same gender; they just don’t act on their feelings. Helping GLBT people to develop a greater level of self-acceptance is a more effective therapy.

▼ **Most trans people seek gender reassignment surgery. FALSE**

While some transsexuals take hormones, have electrolysis (for trans women) or mastectomies (for trans men), and undergo genital reconstruction surgeries, others choose only some of these procedures, because of the tremendous cost of the surgeries, the mixed results (especially for trans men), and their lack of access to medical care in general. Other transgendered people decide not to alter their bodies permanently, but seek to express their gender identities in other ways, such as through crossdressing.

▼ **Bisexual men are largely responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS to heterosexual women. FALSE**

Although articles in many mainstream women's magazines in the 1980s and '90s raised fears that "irresponsible" and "deceitful" bisexual men were an imminent AIDS threat to "innocent" heterosexual women, bisexual men have not been a widespread source of HIV-transmission. Moreover, the stereotyping and scapegoating of bisexual men ignores the realities of AIDS. It is unsafe sexual practices and needle-sharing behavior, not membership in a particular group, that spreads HIV. People who are self-aware and educated about AIDS and safer-sex practices pose no special risk.

▼ **The majority of self-identified GLBT people are white Americans and Europeans. FALSE**

People attracted to others of the same gender exist in all cultures and communities. However, the mainstream U.S. media and many gay publications fail to be inclusive of GLBT people of color.

▼ **Being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is a personal choice that people make. FALSE**

The cause of sexual identity is unknown. Some studies suggest a genetic basis, while others cast doubt on a biological explanation. Similarly, some people feel that they were "born that way," while others regard their sexual identity as a preference.

▼ **Most transsexuals are trans women (biological men who see themselves as female). FALSE**

While trans women have often been more visible, due in part to the history of drag in the gay male community and society's narrow limits on what is considered appropriate "male" behavior and appearance, it is estimated that there are approximately equal numbers of trans women and trans men.

▼ **Bisexuals are equally attracted to men and women. FALSE**

Some are. But many people who identify as bisexual are more attracted to men or more attracted to women. Some say they are attracted to men and women in different ways, and others say gender is not relevant to whom they are interested in.

▼ **Bisexual people are more promiscuous than are heterosexuals or gay men and lesbians. FALSE**

Bisexuality is a sexual orientation. It is independent of the decision to be monogamous or non-monogamous. Some heterosexuals, gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals are monogamous, others are not. It is a mistake to assume that because someone has the potential to be attracted to men and women, they must have twice as many sex partners.

▼ **Bisexuals need at least one partner of each gender. FALSE**

Bisexuals have the potential to be attracted to people of more than one gender, but they do not necessarily need to have a partner of each gender. Most bisexuals do not have to be involved with more than one gender at a time in order to feel fulfilled.

▼ **Providing a young person with information about GLBT people may harm them or coax them to change their sexuality. FALSE**

Because of feeling isolated and lacking information that would enable them to accept themselves, GLBT teens are more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. Suicide is the leading cause of death among gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. These teens may face hostility both at school and at home. One in four gay, lesbian, bisexual youths is forced to leave home due to family conflicts over their sexual orientation.

▼ **Places of worship do not allow openly GLBT people to become members of their congregations. FALSE**

While some places of worship and religious denominations are intolerant of people with different sexual and gender identities, others are very accepting, including Reform Judaism, Unitarian Universalists, the United Church of Christ, the Society of Friends (Quakers), and the predominantly GLBT Metropolitan Community Church. More than thirty churches and temples in central Ohio readily welcome GLBT people as worshippers; some have GLBT clergy and perform same-gender union ceremonies.

▼ **GLBT people are protected under civil rights laws like other groups and are asking for “special rights.” FALSE**

In most of Ohio, employers can fire or not hire someone simply because of their sexual or gender identity. GLBT people can also legally be denied housing and access to public facilities in much of the state. Only in Columbus and ten other Ohio municipalities is discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, housing, and public accommodation unlawful. And only the city of Toledo provides the same kind of protection for people based on their gender identity.

Pathways of Ally Development

Adversary Path

- Accept the status quo
- Don't acknowledge your own position of power
- Deny your privilege and your role in oppression
- Believe society is colorblind and that no differences or inequalities really exist
- Ignore acts of discrimination
- Believe that we are all responsible for our position in society
- Get stuck feeling guilty for your personal and group's actions in the past
- Be defensive
- Perpetuate stereotypes
- Tell offensive jokes
- Believe that you know what a particular oppression feels like
- Assume that we are "done" dealing with diversity and discrimination in our society
- Show pity and sympathy for the targets of oppression
- Believe that working against oppression only benefits the targets of oppression
- Benefit from being seen as an individual and not having to represent your whole group without recognizing how others do not have this advantage

Ally Path

- Interrupt offensive jokes
- Learn from someone who is different from you
- Speak up for people whose voices are not present
- Educate yourself and others
- Reflect on your own experiences
- Interact with and find support from other allies
- Don't assume that you completely know someone else's experience
- Try to empathize not sympathize
- Keep an open mind

- Attend a protest or march for something you believe in
- Acknowledge the power bestowed upon you based on social group membership and utilize this power to bring about social change that benefits all people, especially those who are not as privileged
- Vote for candidates who promote social justice issues
- Help others understand their own privileges
- Don't show pity for others
- Seek to understand all the different forms of oppression
- Notice the numerous intersections between different forms of oppression
- Highlight the commonalities between different targeted groups
- Don't buy into stereotypes
- Don't expect external rewards for your work as an ally—feel good and be proud about the work you do
- Walk your talk
- Be comfortable with criticism and feedback
- Try to acknowledge your own prejudices and baggage
- Challenge the norm
- Use examples that don't exclude a particular group's experience
- Don't get stuck feeling guilty for the oppression of the past
- Take ownership of your own conscious and/or unconscious participation in oppression
- Believe that unlearning oppression is a never-ending process
- Speak only from your own experience
- Don't expect someone else to represent an entire social group
- Support people in the manner they want to be supported
- Recognize that no one form of oppression is more significant than another—there is no hierarchy of oppressions
- Be inclusive
- Accept that none of us are experts in diversity
- Provide support and assistance to those in need when requested, don't assume neediness
- Know that the past is not your fault, but the present and future are your responsibility

Adapted from Jeff Ederer and Lori Barnes, 2000