

Coming Out As A Straight Ally

What Is An Ally?

In the broadest sense, an Ally is “a person who is a member of the dominant or majority group who works to end oppression in his or her private and professional life through support of, and as an advocate for the oppressed population” (Washington & Evans, *Becoming an Ally*). Allies to racial, religious, and ethnic minorities have been remarkably effective in promoting positive change in the dominant culture, and only recently has their instrumental position been extended to the area of sexual orientation. Straight allies are some of the most effective and powerful advocates and sources of support for the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movement.

An Ally Strives To...

- *be a friend
- *be a listener
- *be open-minded
- *have his or her own opinions
- *be willing to talk
- *commit him or herself to personal growth in spite of the possible discomfort
- *recognize his or her own prejudices
- *join others with a common purpose
- *believe that all persons regardless of age, sex, race, gender, religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation should be treated with dignity and respect
- *engage in the process of developing a culture free of homophobia or heterosexism
- *recognize his or her mistakes, but not use them as an excuse
- *be responsible for empowering his or her role in a community, particularly as it relates to responding to homophobia
- *recognize the legal powers and privileges that heterosexuals have which GLBT people are denied

As important as it is to define what an Ally is in a positive sense, it is also helpful to understand the boundaries of an Ally's role.

An Ally is Not...

- *someone with ready-made answers
- *necessarily a counselor
- *expected to proceed with an interaction if levels of comfort or personal safety have been violated

Adapted from the Human Rights Campaign Foundation

Becoming an Ally

Our society is heterosexist, so most people grow up with unexamined heterosexist assumptions and attitudes. It takes time to overcome those assumptions, attitudes and the behavior to which they give rise. We call that process "becoming an ally" of non-heterosexual people. The movement from heterosexism to alliance is described in stages below.

1. Active Oppression

- laughing at or telling anti-homosexual jokes
- making fun of people who don't fit traditional gender stereotypes
- verbal or physical harassment of people perceived as homosexual
- supporting anti-homosexual laws, policies and legislation

2. Indifference

- passively accepting acts by others that demean homosexual people
- ignoring the topic of homosexuality (in preparing programs, discussions, etc.)

3. Oppression through Lack of Action

- recognizing the heterosexism or homophobia in others' speech and acts and being uncomfortable, but refusing to say or do anything about it
- avoiding participating in activities or programs because people might think you are gay or lesbian

4. Confronting Oppression

- politely confronting anti-homosexual joke-tellers, but not pushing it
- deciding to participate in activities regardless of what others will think
- mediating between people with differing opinions

5. Growing as an Ally

- reading books about homosexuality
- being aware of and sensitive to issues that minorities face
- attending non-heterosexual cultural events
- talking to others about issues facing sexual minorities
- joining organizations that support LGBT people
- listening to gay or lesbian music
- educating yourself rather than waiting for LGBT people to teach you
- making yourself aware of individuals, organizations, agencies, staff, faculty and courses that deal with issues of oppression

6. Challenging Oppression

- educating others

- engaging people in dialogue about sexual minority issues (or presenting programs, incorporating material into a class presentation, making handouts or posters, inviting LGBT speakers to your group)
- confronting not just obviously homophobic comments but also comments of the nature of "I am not prejudiced, but...."

7. Joining an Ally Support Network

- joining groups of other allies, such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
- creating a support group for Allies
- recognizing the efforts of others to confront inappropriate behaviors and effect change
- encouraging and rewarding employees or students who are inclusive and respectful of differences among people
- promoting an atmosphere of RESPECT on the job
- appreciating differences among individuals within groups

8. Challenging Heterosexist Systems

- working to change heterosexist institutional practices, such as
 - teachers working for an inclusive family life curriculum
 - administrators allowing live-in domestic partners for those with on-campus jobs
 - employers extending benefits to domestic partners
- including in educational literature representations of LGBT people
- emphasizing the importance of LGBT role models in the workplace and classroom
- training staff to be sensitive to LGBT people and issues
- refusing to buy products and support corporations that do not have inclusive non-discrimination and domestic partnership policies
- refusing to have your professional organization's meetings in a state or city that has anti-LGBT laws and policies
- opposing candidates who oppose LGBT civil rights

-- Adapted by Dr. Ladelle McWhorter, 1996