



Safe Zone Toolkit:

Resources for Working with Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Students, Faculty and Staff at Kingsborough Community College

The Safe Zone Training Program is led by

Prof. Jason VanOra, Behavioral Sciences and Human Services
jason.vanora@kbcc.cuny.edu

Prof. Jennifer Oliveri, English
Jennifer.oliveri@kbcc.cuny.edu


Prof. Tisha Ulmer, English
tisha.ulmer@kbcc.cuny.edu

With special thanks to Zoey Lavallee, for updating and *vastly improving* this toolkit.

Toolkit adapted from New York City College of Technology (Terri Clark, MPH, and Daniel Fictum, MA, MFA) who in turn adapted materials from the American College Health Association Safe Zone Development Program.

Table of Contents

1. Glossary of LGBTQ-Related Terms
2. Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack
 - 2.1. *Sexual Orientation*
 - 2.2. *Gender Identity*
3. Support Students When They Come Out to You: *When a Student Comes Out to You and Tells You They Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer or Transgender*
4. Assessing Your Personal Beliefs to Foster Positive Relationships with LGBTQ people: *Guidelines for Positive Interactions*
5. Suggestions for Working with LGBTQ Students
6. When to Refer an LGBTQ Student to a Mental Health Professional
7. Harassment



The Safe Zone program is designed to address the issues faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer students, faculty, and staff. Its most concrete goal is to identify and educate campus members who will become Safe Zone Allies—a campus-wide network of committed individuals who serve as the first points of contact for those who want to speak to a caring person about LGBTQ issues. In a broader sense, the existence of a thriving Safe Zone program will send a message to all members of the Kingsborough community that LGBTQ people are welcome members of that community.

What is an Ally?

An ally is an individual who speaks out and stands up for a person or group that is targeted and discriminated against. An ally works to end oppression by supporting and advocating for people who are stigmatized, discriminated against or treated unfairly.

For the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities, an ally is any person who supports and stands up for the rights of LGBT people. Allies have been involved in almost all movements for social change, and allies can make a significant contribution to the LGBT rights movement. It is important for allies to demonstrate that LGBT people are not alone as they work to improve school climate, and to take a stand in places where it might not be safe for LGBT people to be out or visible. Any educator, LGBT or non-LGBT, can be an ally to LGBT students. ¹

LGBTQ is an acronym²

Meant to encompass a whole bunch of diverse sexualities and genders. Folks often refer to the Q (standing for “queer”*) as an umbrella term, under which lives a whole bunch of identities. This is helpful because lesbian, gay and bisexual aren’t the only marginalized sexualities, and transgender* isn’t the only gender identity. In fact, there are many more of both!

* The “Q” sometimes stands for “questioning” and “transgender” is often thought of as an umbrella term itself (sometimes abbreviated “trans”). Lots of asterisks, lots of exceptions, because hey—we’re talking about lots of different folks with different lived experiences to be

Glossary of LGBTQ-Related Terms

The glossary is designed to provide basic definitions of words and phrases commonly used in discussions about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and related issues. All language is constantly evolving; new terms are introduced, while others fade from use or change their meaning over time. This remains true for the following terms and definitions. For terms that refer to people’s identities, people must self-identity for these terms to be appropriately used to describe them.³

Ally: A member of the majority or dominant group who works to end oppression by recognizing their own privilege and supporting or advocating for the oppressed population. For example, a straight cisgender person who

supports and stands up for the equality of LGBT people.

Asexual: A person who does not experience sexual attraction, but may experience other forms of attraction

¹ GLSEN, *The Safe Space Kit*, 5.

² Safe Zone Training Participant Packet (thesafezoneproject.com)

³ Glossary taken from GLSEN’s *The Safe Space Kit* (40-42). Definitions not from GLSEN are marked with (*). Definitions from Trans Student Educational Resources are marked with (+)

(e.g., intellectual, emotional). Asexual people may also identify as “bisexual,” “gay,” “lesbian,” “pansexual,” “queer,” “straight,” and many more.

Bisexual: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to two genders. For example, a person attracted to some male-identified people and some female-identified people.

Cisgender/cis: A person whose gender identity and expression are aligned with the gender they were assigned at birth.

Coming Out: The ongoing process that an LGBT person goes through, to recognize their own identities pertaining to sexual orientation and/or gender identity and gender expression, and to be open about them with others.

Dyke: A derogatory term directed at a person perceived as a lesbian. It is oftentimes used against women who are gender nonconforming, with the assumption being that their gender nonconformity implies a sexual attraction to women. Many lesbians (of all gender-expressions) have reclaimed the term and use it as an affirming label with which to identify.

***Family of Choice**—persons forming an individual’s social, emotional, and practical support network and often fulfilling the functions of blood relations

***Family of Origin**—biological family, or the family in which one was raised. These individuals may or may not be part of a LGBTQ person’s support system.

Gay: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some members of the same gender. “Gay” often refers to a male-identified person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some other males. “Gay” should not be used as an umbrella term to refer to all lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people; the term “LGBT” is more accurate and inclusive.

Gender: A set of cultural identities, expressions and roles — codified as feminine or masculine — that are assigned to people, based upon the interpretation of their bodies, and more specifically, their sexual and reproductive anatomy. Since gender is a social construction, it is possible to reject or modify the assignment made, and develop something that feels truer and just to oneself.

Gender Binary: A socially constructed system of viewing gender as consisting solely of two categories, “male” and “female,” in which no other possibilities for gender are believed to exist. The gender binary is inaccurate because it does not take into account the diversity of gender identities and gender expressions among all people. The gender binary is oppressive to anyone that does not conform to dominant societal gender norms.

Gender Expression: The multiple ways (e.g., behaviors, dress) in which a person may choose to communicate gender to oneself and/or to others.

Gender Identity: How an individual identifies in terms of their gender. Gender identities may include, “male,” “female,” “androgynous,” “transgender,” “genderqueer” and many others, or a combination thereof.

Genderism: A system of oppression that benefits cisgender people at the expense of transgender and gender nonconforming people. Genderism may take the form of Transphobia, bias and discrimination towards transgender and gender nonconforming people.

Gender Nonconforming or Gender Variant: A person who has a gender identity and/or gender expression that does not conform to the gender they were assigned at birth. People who identify as “gender nonconforming” or “gender variant” may or may not also identify as “transgender.”

Genderqueer: A person who has a gender identity and/or gender expression that does not conform to the gender they were assigned at birth. People who identify as “genderqueer” may or may not also identify as “transgender.”

***Gender Roles**—the socially constructed and culturally specific behavior and appearance expectations imposed on women (femininity) and men (masculinity).

Heterosexism: A system of oppression that benefits straight/heterosexual people at the expense of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Heterosexism may take the form of Homophobia or Biphobia, bias and discrimination towards lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

Homosexual: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some members of the same gender. Many people prefer the terms “lesbian” or “gay,” instead.

***Hormone Therapy** (also Hormone Replacement Therapy): administration of hormones to affect the development of secondary sex characteristics of the opposite assigned gender. HRT is a process, possibly lifelong, of using hormones to change the internal body chemistry.

Identity: Identity is how we understand ourselves, what we call ourselves and often who we connect to and associate with. Each of us has a unique diversity of social identities based on our sexual orientation, gender identity, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion and other important parts of who we are. Those identities develop over time, intersect with each other and help give meaning to our lives. Below, you'll find many common terms that people use to identify themselves, especially in relation to their sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. It's important to remember that these terms are about self-identification; no one can tell anyone else how to identify or what terms to use.

Intersex: An umbrella term used to describe a variety of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive and/or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the medical definitions of female or male.

Lesbian: A person who is female-identified and who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some other females.

LGBT or LGBTQ: An umbrella term referring to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender. Sometimes the acronym is written as LGBTQ, with the "Q" referring to those who identify as queer and/or questioning. The acronym can also include additional letters, in reference to other identities that do not conform to dominant societal norms around sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

Oppression: Systems of power and privilege, based on bias, which benefit some social groups over others. Oppression can 1) take many forms, including ideological, institutional, interpersonal and internalized; 2) be intentional and unintentional; 3) be conscious and unconscious; and 4) be visible and invisible. Oppression prevents the oppressed groups and individuals from being free and equal. Many people face oppression based on more than one of their identities, creating a unique complexity of challenges and resilience.

***Outing:** disclosing someone's sexual

orientation or gender identity to another person without permission.

Pansexual: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some people, regardless of their gender identity.

Preferred Gender Pronouns (PGPs): The pronoun or set of pronouns that a person would like others to call them by, when their proper name is not being used. Traditional examples include "she/her/hers" or "he/him/his." Some people prefer gender-neutral pronouns, such as "ze/hir/hirs," "zie/zir/zirs," "ey/em/eirs," "per/per/pers," "hu/hum/hus," or "they/them/theirs." Some people prefer no pronouns at all.

Queer: An umbrella term used to describe a sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that does not conform to dominant societal norms. While it is used as a neutral, or even a positive term among many LGBT people today, historically "queer" was used as a derogatory slur.

Questioning: A person who is in the process of understanding and exploring what their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and gender expression might be.

Reclaimed Words: As language evolves, some individuals and communities choose to identify with terms that had previously been used as slurs against them. The words are "reclaimed" and given new meaning, often imbued with a sense of pride and resilience. Examples include, "queer," "dyke," and "tranny," among others. It's important to remember that identity is unique to each individual; not all members of a community readily accept the use of reclaimed words, as they may still find them offensive and hurtful.

+Sex: A set of characteristics associated with reproduction and biology that generally assign individuals into categories of "male" or "female."

Sexism: A system of oppression that benefits male-identified people at the expense of female-identified people.

Sexual Orientation: The inner feelings of who a person is attracted to emotionally and/or physically, in relation to their own gender identity. Some people may identify as "asexual," "bisexual," "gay," "lesbian," "pansexual," "queer," "straight," and many more.

Straight or Heterosexual: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some

members of another gender (specifically, a male-identified person who is attracted to some females or a female-identified person who is attracted to some males).

Transgender: A person whose gender identity and/ or expression are not aligned with the gender they were assigned at birth. “Transgender” is often used as an umbrella term encompassing a large number of identities related to gender nonconformity.

+Transition: A person’s process of developing and assuming a gender expression to match their gender identity. Transition can include: coming out to one’s family, friends, and/or co-workers; changing one’s name and/or sex on legal documents; hormone therapy; and possibly (though not always) some form of surgery. It’s best not to assume how one transitions as it is different for everyone

LGBTQ-Inclusive Language Dos and DON'Ts

AVOID SAYING...	SAY INSTEAD...	WHY?	EXAMPLE
“Hermaphrodite”	“Intersex”	Hermaphrodite is a stigmatizing, inaccurate word with a negative medical history.	“What are the best practices for the medical care of intersex infants?”
“Homosexual”	“Gay”	“Homosexual” often connotes a medical diagnosis, or a discomfort with LGBTQ people.	“We want to do a better job of being inclusive of our gay employees.”
“Born female” or “Born male”	“Assigned female/male at birth”	“-bodied” language is often interpreted as pressure to medically transition, or invalidation of one’s gender identity.	“Max was assigned female at birth, then he transitioned in high school.”
“Female-bodied” or “Male-bodied”			
“A gay” or “a transgender”	“A gay/transgender person”	Gay and transgender are adjectives that describe a person/group.	“We had a transgender athlete in our league this year”
Transgender people and normal people”	“Transgender people and cisgender people”	Saying “normal” implies “abnormal,” which is a stigmatizing way to refer to a person.	“This group is open to both transgender and cisgender people.”
“Both genders” or “Opposite sexes”	“All genders”	“Both” implies there are only two; “Opposite” reinforces antagonism amongst genders	“Video games aren’t just a boy thing – kids of all genders play them.”
“Ladies and gentlemen”	“Everyone,” “Folks,” “Honored guests,” etc.	Moving away from binary language is more	“Good morning everyone, next stop Picadilly Station

		inclusive of people of all genders	
"Mailman," "fireman," "policeman," etc.	"Mail clerk," "Firefighter," "Police officer," etc.	People of all genders do these jobs	"I actually saw a firefighter rescue a cat from a tree"
"It" when referring to someone (e.g., when pronouns are unknown"	"They"	"It" is for referring to things, not people.	"You know, I am not sure how they identify."

Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

Daily effects of straight and cisgender privilege: This article is based on Peggy McIntosh's article on white privilege. These dynamics are but a few examples of the privilege which straight people have. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer-identified folk have a range of different experiences, but cannot count on most of these conditions in their lives.

Sexual Orientation: On a daily basis, as a straight person...

- ✓ I can go for months without being called straight.
- ✓ I am not asked to think about why I am straight.
- ✓ I am never asked to speak for everyone who is heterosexual.
- ✓ People don't ask why I made my choice of sexual orientation.
- ✓ People don't ask why I made my choice to be public about my sexual orientation.
- ✓ Nobody calls me straight as an insult.
- ✓ People do not assume I am experienced in sex (or that I even have it!) merely because of my sexual orientation.
- ✓ If I pick up a magazine, watch TV, or play music, I can be certain my sexual orientation will be represented.
- ✓ When I talk about my heterosexuality (such as in a joke or talking about my relationships), I will not be accused of pushing my sexual orientation onto others.
- ✓ I do not have to fear that if my family or friends find out about my sexual orientation there will be economic, emotional, physical or psychological consequences.
- ✓ I can go home from most meetings, classes, and conversations without feeling excluded, fearful, attacked, isolated, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, stereotyped or feared because of my sexual orientation.
- ✓ I can be sure that my classes will require curricular materials that testify to the existence of people with my sexual orientation.
- ✓ I can easily find a religious community that will not exclude me for being heterosexual.
- ✓ I can count on finding a therapist or doctor willing and able to talk about my sexuality.
- ✓ I am guaranteed to find sex education literature for couples with my sexual orientation.
- ✓ Because of my sexual orientation, I do not need to worry that people will harass or assault me.
- ✓ My masculinity/femininity is not challenged because of my sexual orientation.
- ✓ I am not identified/defined by my sexual orientation.
- ✓ If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has sexual orientation overtones.
- ✓ I can hold hands or kiss in public with my significant other and not have people double-take or stare.

- ✓ I can choose to not think politically about my sexual orientation.
- ✓ I did not grow up with games that attack my sexual orientation (IE fag tag or smear the queer).
- ✓ People can use terms that describe my sexual orientation and mean positive things (IE "straight as an arrow", "standing up straight" or "straightened out") instead of demeaning terms (IE "ewww, that's gay" or being "queer").
- ✓ I can be open about my sexual orientation without worrying about my job.

Adapted from http://www.cs.earlham.edu/~hyrax/personal/files/student_res/straightprivilege.htm

Gender Identity: On a daily basis, as a cisgendered person...

- ✓ Strangers don't assume they can ask me what my genitals look like and how I have sex.
- ✓ My validity as a man/woman/human is not based upon how much surgery I've had or how well I "pass" as a non-transperson.
- ✓ When initiating sex with someone, I do not have to worry that they won't be able to deal with my parts or that having sex with me will cause my partner to question his or her own sexual orientation.
- ✓ I am not excluded from events which are either explicitly or de facto* men-born-men or women-born- women only. (*basically anything involving nudity)
- ✓ My politics are not questioned based on the choices I make with regard to my body.
- ✓ I don't have to hear "so have you had THE surgery?" or "oh, so you're REALLY a [incorrect sex or gender]?" each time I come out to someone.
- ✓ I am not expected to constantly defend my medical decisions.
- ✓ Strangers do not ask me what my "real name" [birth name] is and then assume that they have a right to call me by that name.
- ✓ People do not disrespect me by using incorrect pronouns even after they've been corrected.
- ✓ I do not have to worry that someone wants to be my friend or have sex with me in order to prove his or her "hipness" or good politics.
- ✓ I do not have to worry about whether I will be able to find a bathroom to use or whether I will be safe changing in a locker room.
- ✓ When engaging in political action, I do not have to worry about the *gendered* repercussions of being arrested. (i.e. what will happen to me if the cops find out that my genitals do not match my gendered appearance? Will I end up in a cell with people of my own gender?)
- ✓ I do not have to defend my right to be a part of "Queer" and gays and lesbians will not try to exclude me from OUR movement in order to gain political legitimacy for themselves.
- ✓ My experience of gender (or gendered spaces) is not viewed as "baggage" by others of the gender in which I live.
- ✓ I do not have to choose between either invisibility ("passing") or being consistently "othered" and/or tokenized based on my gender.
- ✓ I am not told that my sexual orientation and gender identity are mutually exclusive.
- ✓ When I go to the gym or a public pool, I can use the showers.
- ✓ If I end up in the emergency room, I do not have to worry that my gender will keep me from receiving appropriate treatment nor will all of my medical issues be seen as a product of my gender. ("Your nose is running and your throat hurts? Must be due to the hormones!")
- ✓ My health insurance provider (or public health system) does not specifically exclude me from receiving benefits or treatments available to others because of my gender.
- ✓ When I express my internal identities in my daily life, I am not considered "mentally ill" by the medical establishment.
- ✓ I am not required to undergo extensive psychological evaluation in order to receive basic medical care.
- ✓ The medical establishment does not serve as a "gatekeeper" which disallows self-determination of what happens to my body.

- ✓ People do not use me as a scapegoat for their own unresolved gender issues.

Adapted from http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/gsc/downloads/resources/Gender_Privilege.pdf

Coming Out⁴

As an ally, LGBT students may come to you for support, comfort or guidance. You may encounter a situation where a student comes out or reveals their sexual orientation or gender identity to you. You may be the first or only person an LGBT student comes out to. It is important that you support the student in a constructive way. Keep in mind that the student may be completely comfortable with their sexual orientation or gender identity and may not need help

⁴ GLSEN, 12-13

dealing with it or may not be in need of any support. It may be that the student just wanted to tell someone, or just simply to tell you so you might know them better. Below you will find more information on the coming out process and how you can be a supportive ally when students come out to you.

WHAT DOES “COMING OUT” Mean?

Simply put, coming out is a means to publicly declare one’s identity, whether to a person in private or a group of people. In our society most people are generally presumed to be heterosexual, so there is usually no need for a heterosexual person to make a statement to others that discloses their sexual orientation. Similarly, most people feel that their current gender is aligned with their sex assigned at birth, therefore never having a need to disclose one’s gender identity. However, a person who is LGBT must decide whether or not to reveal to others their sexual orientation or gender identity.

To come out is to take a risk by sharing one’s identity, sometimes to one person in conversation, which is why it is so important for a student to have support. One positive aspect of coming out is not having to hide who you are anymore. However, there can be dangers that come with revealing yourself. A student who comes out may be open to more anti-LGBT name-calling, bullying and harassment, yet they may also feel more comfortable and free to be themselves. One of the most important things you as an ally can do for an LGBT student is to be there for them in a safe, respectful and helpful way.

sometimes to a group or in a public setting. The actual act of coming out can be as simple as saying “I’m gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender,” but it can be a difficult and emotional process for an LGBT student to go through,

supportive ally when students come out to you.

SHOULD SCHOOL STAFF BE CAREFUL OF DISCLOSING A STUDENT’S SEXUAL ORIENTATION OR GENDER IDENTITY TO OTHERS?

Absolutely. School staff must at all times be cognizant of the highly sensitive nature of information regarding a student’s sexual orientation and gender identity. School staff must exercise the utmost discretion and professionalism and be respectful of student privacy in discussing these matters.

In contrast to coming out, when a person chooses to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity, “outing” occurs when someone else tells others that a particular individual is LGBT without that person’s permission. We often don’t know what someone’s beliefs are or reactions might be, and outing someone may have large repercussions for students. Although it may be hard to believe, there are students whose emotional and physical safety were jeopardized when school staff outed them to other students and even family members.

Support Students When They Come Out to You

When a Student Comes Out to You and Tells You They Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer or Transgender...⁵

⁵ GLSEN, 14.

- **Offer support but don't assume a student needs any help.** The student might be completely comfortable with their sexual orientation or gender identity and may not need help dealing with it or be in need of any support. It may be that the student just wanted to tell someone, or just simply to tell you so you might know them better. Offer and be available to support your students as they come out to others
- **Be a role model of acceptance.** Always model good behavior by using inclusive language and setting an accepting environment by not making assumptions about people's sexual orientation or gender identity. Addressing other's (adults and students) biased language and addressing stereotypes and myths about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people also position you as a positive role model. By demonstrating that you are respectful of LGBT people and intolerant of homophobia and transphobia, LGBT students are more likely to see you as a supportive educator.
- **Appreciate the student's courage.** There is often a risk in telling someone something personal, especially sharing for the first time one's sexual orientation or gender identity, when it is generally not considered the norm. Consider someone's coming out a gift and thank them for giving that gift to you. Sharing this personal information with you means that the student respects and trusts you.
- **Listen, listen, listen.** One of the best ways to support a student is to hear them out and let the student know you are there to listen. Coming out is a long process, and chances are you'll be approached again to discuss this process, the challenges and the joys of being out at school.
- **assure and respect confidentiality.** The student told you and may or may not be ready to tell others. Let the student know that the conversation is confidential and that you won't share the information with anyone else, unless they ask for your help. If they want others to know, doing it in their own way with their own timing is important.

- Respect their privacy.
- **Ask questions that demonstrate understanding, acceptance and compassion.** Some suggestions are:
 - ✓ Have you been able to tell anyone else?
 - ✓ Has this been a secret you have had to keep from others or have you told other people?
 - ✓ Do you feel safe in school? Supported by the adults in your life?
 - ✓ Do you need any help of any kind? Resources or someone to listen?
 - ✓ Have I ever offended you unknowingly?
- **Remember that the student has not changed.** They are still the same person you knew before the disclosure; you just have more information about them, which might improve your relationship. Let the student know that you feel the same way about them as you always have and that they are still the same person. If you are shocked, try not to let the surprise lead you to view or treat the student any differently.
- **Challenge traditional norms.** You may need to consider your own beliefs about sexual orientation, gender identity and gender roles. Do not expect people to conform to societal norms about gender or sexual orientation.
- **Be prepared to give a referral.** If there are questions you can't answer, or if the student does need some emotional support, be prepared to refer them to a sympathetic counselor, a hotline, your school's GSA or an LGBT youth group or community center.

SOME ADDITIONAL THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN A STUDENT COMES OUT TO YOU AS TRANSGENDER:

- **Validate the person's gender identity and expression.** It is important to use the pronoun and name appropriate to the gender presented or that the person requests — this is showing respect. In other words, if someone identifies as female, then refer to the person as she; if they identify as male, refer to the person as he. Or use gender neutral language. Never use the word

“it” when referring to a person, to do so is insulting and disrespectful.

- **Remember that gender identity is separate from sexual orientation.** Knowing someone is transgender does not provide you with any information about their sexual orientation.

WHAT NOT TO SAY WHEN SOMEONE COMES OUT TO YOU:

- **“I knew it!”** This makes the disclosure about you and not the student, and you might have been making an assumption based on stereotypes.
- **“Are you sure?” “You’re just confused.” “It’s just a phase — it will pass.”** This suggests that the student doesn’t know who they are.
- **“You just haven’t found a good woman yet” said to a male or “a good man yet” said to a female.** This

assumes that everyone is straight or should be.

- **“Shhh, don’t tell anyone.”** This implies that there is something wrong and that being LGBT must be kept hidden. If you have real reason to believe that disclosing this information will cause the student harm, then make it clear that is your concern. Say, “Thanks for telling me. We should talk about how tolerant our school and community is. You may want to consider how this may affect your decision about who to come out to.”
- **“You can’t be gay — you’ve had relationships with people of the opposite sex.”** This refers only to behavior, while sexual orientation is about inner feelings.

Assessing Your Personal Beliefs to Foster Positive Relationships with LGBTQ People

People aren’t born prejudiced, so where does it come from? From the moment we are born, we are inundated with messages, spoken and unspoken, about different types of people. Often we learn stereotypes and prejudices without even realizing it. Some of these messages may have been about ourselves and what we are “supposed to” or not “supposed to” be.

All of us, LGBT and non-LGBT, have learned messages about LGBT people. What were the earliest messages you received about LGBT people and where did they come from? Were they positive, negative or neutral? Understanding the messages we receive can help us identify our own beliefs and

*biases that we can then challenge, helping to make us stronger allies.*⁶

Guidelines for Positive Interactions

YOU SHOULD...

- ✓ Check into your feelings values, beliefs, and thinking about LGBTQ issues and people.
- ✓ Educate yourself about homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender issues.
- ✓ Talk with LGBTQ people and with those who support them
- ✓ Identify community resources.
- ✓ Provide a supportive atmosphere for those who are or think they may be LGBTQ. Have LGBTQ books or periodicals in view.
- ✓ Avoid language (forms) that implies that all people are heterosexual and either “single, married, or divorced.”
- ✓ Advocate and participate in educational programs for your staff, so that LGBTQ people receive service without prejudice and with the empathy and warmth deserved by all.
- ✓ Remember that other workers at your workplace – or family members of workers - may be LGBTQ.
- ✓ Remember that people do not choose their sexual orientation—whether they are gay or straight. Note that “sexual orientation” is a term preferred in the LGBTQ community, instead of “sexual preference” or “choice.”
- ✓ Remember that societal oppression and discrimination create much of the unhappiness of many LGBTQ people.
- ✓ Remember that one’s experience as a member of the LGBTQ community varies depending on their gender identity, gender presentation, race, socioeconomic status, and resources.
- ✓ Remember that stereotypical “gay” behavior or appearance does not mean that a person evidencing that behavior or appearance is necessarily “gay.”
- ✓ Help people to help themselves by increasing their sense of self-worth, self-acceptance, self-reliance so they can take charge of their own lives and integrate their feeling, thinking, and behavior in a positive way.
- ✓ Know when your skills and knowledge reach their limit. Refer people elsewhere when they need help that you cannot effectively supply.
- ✓ Notice when and how negative feelings you may have toward LGBTQ people might prevent you from offering unprejudiced help. If you cannot change your feelings, refer

⁶ GLSEN, 7.

elsewhere.

- ✓ Acquaint yourself particularly with LGBTQ networks in your area so you can inform people of these resources.
- ✓ Help work for the human and civil rights of LGBTQ people in order to create a more positive environment for everyone

DON'T...

- ✓ Don't assume that a lesbian, gay or bisexual person's sexuality is the most important aspect of that person. Don't assume that a transgender person's gender identity is the most important aspect of that person. Everyone is a multi-faceted individual for who sexuality and gender are aspects of their life.
- ✓ Don't assume that sexual orientation or gender identity is the cause of a problem in the person's life. "He's depressed all the time because he's gay." LGBTQ people have the same problems as everyone else. They are just as likely to be well adjusted, and just as likely to have difficulty coping with stresses in their lives. Because of discrimination, they have to deal with particular stresses.
- ✓ Don't assume that being an LGBTQ person in our society is so hard and presents so many problems that you should feel sorry for LGBTQ people and/or assume that they would all really rather be heterosexual.
- ✓ Don't assume that being LGBTQ doesn't matter. "They are the same as everybody else, and I treat everyone the same." The experience of being LGBTQ in a homophobic, transphobic and heterosexist society has a profound effect on how that person views themselves and how they experience the world.

Suggestions for working with LGBTQ Students⁷

1. Respect confidentiality. It is imperative that you can be trusted.
2. Be informed. Most of us are products of a homophobic society. It is important that you are aware of the needs of LGBTQ students.
3. Examine your own biases. If you are uncomfortable with dealing with the issue, and know that you are unable to be open and accepting, you need to refer the student to someone else.
4. Know when and where to seek help. Become familiar with available resources.

⁷ From PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

5. Maintain a balanced perspective. Sexual thoughts and feelings are only a small (but important) part of a person's self.
6. Be aware that you can be helpful by just listening and allowing LGBTQ students the opportunity to vent feelings.
7. Be supportive. Share with them that this is an issue that others must deal with, too.
8. Don't try to guess who identify as a member of the LGBTQ community.
9. Challenge bigoted remarks and jokes. This shows support.

When to Refer an LGBTQ Student to a Mental Health Professional

Most of the students you will encounter are seeking support, advice, information, or they may just be offering you the chance to get to know them a little better. Occasionally, you may see a student who is experiencing psychological distress. This may be evident in the following:

1. When a student states they are no longer able to function in their normal capacity within their classes; when they have seen a drop in grades or academic performance.
2. When a student can no longer cope with their day to day activities and responsibilities. A student may state they are no longer going to classes or they have been late for their job and may be fired soon if this continues.
3. A student expresses depressive symptoms such as: sleep disturbance, crying spells, fatigue, loss of interest or pleasure in previous enjoyable activities, and/or inability to concentrate or complete tasks.
4. A student expresses severe anxiety symptoms such as: feelings of panic, shortness of breath, headaches, sweaty palms, dry mouth, or racing thoughts.
5. A student expresses suicidal thoughts or feelings.
6. A student has no support. They have no friends or have no friends with whom they can talk about their sexual orientation or gender identity. This person may not need counseling, but could benefit from a support group and the Counseling Center can make that assessment and referral.
7. A good guideline to use if all else fails: If you are feeling overwhelmed or worried about a student, refer them to a mental health professional!

Harassment

WHEN A STUDENT INFORMS YOU THEY HAVE BEEN HARASSED

Step 1. Ask the student if they are safe. Assess their situation regarding safety.

Step 2. Inform the student that you will protect their confidentiality to the best of your ability and will not tell anyone their name without their permission.

Step 3. If the student does not feel safe, immediately call the campus police and the LGBTQ advisor.

Step 4. Make sure identifying information regarding the student is not revealed while communicating the situation with other Safe Zone members.

HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS

- ✓ Do not handle the situation alone if at all possible. You could spend hours with the student on this issue. Try to refer the student to the LGBTQ Center, the Counseling Center, the Dean of Students, and/or the campus police.
- ✓ When communicating with campus police do not expect or assume that they will be sensitive to the issues of LGBTQ students. In fact, it is likely the campus police have had little sensitivity training or exposure to LGBTQ students regarding reporting of harassment. Make sure that the person(s) assigned to your particular case understands that the identity of the student cannot under any circumstances be revealed, without their permission, to the general public or media. Police reports need to be purged of all identifying information (name, address, phone, etc.) before it is released to the media and general public.