

Ally Packet

Developed by the Stonewall Center,
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Becoming an Ally

What Is an Ally?

An ally is a member of the dominant social group who takes a stand against social injustice directed at a target group(s)—for example, white people who speak out against racism, or heterosexual individuals who speak out against heterosexism and homophobia. An ally works to be an agent of social change rather than an agent of oppression. When a form of oppression has multiple target groups, as do racism, ableism, and heterosexism, target group members can be allies to other targeted social groups (African Americans can be allies to Asian Americans, blind people can be allies to people who use wheelchairs, and lesbians can be allies to bisexuals).

Characteristics of an Ally

- Feeling good about your own social group membership and being comfortable and proud of your own identity
- Taking responsibility for learning about your own heritage, culture, and experiences in society and the cultures and experiences of oppressed groups
- Learning how oppression works in everyday life
- Listening to and respecting the perspectives and experiences of members of oppressed groups
- Acknowledging unearned privileges that were received as a result of your status in society and working to earn these privileges for oppressed groups
- Recognizing that unlearning oppressive beliefs is a lifelong process
- Being willing to take risks and try new behaviors
- Acting in spite of your own fear and the resistance of others
- Being willing to be confronted about your own behavior and consider change
- Committing yourself to take action against social injustice in any way you have influence
- Understanding the connections among all forms of social injustice
- Believing you can make a difference by acting and speaking out against social injustice
- Knowing how to cultivate support from other allies

Definitions

Terms You Need to Know to Be an Effective Ally

Appropriate Group Terminology

Bisexual: An individual who is romantically and physically attracted to some people of different genders. Bisexuals need not have equal attraction to or sexual experience with men and women.

Cisgender: A person who is gender-typical or non-transgender.

Gay Man: A man who is romantically and physically attracted to some other men.

Heterosexual: An individual who is romantically and physically attracted to people of a different gender than oneself.

Intersex Person: An individual whose combination of chromosomes, hormones, internal sex organs, gonads, and/or genitals is not considered "standard" for either male or female. About one in 2,000 children, or five children per day in the United States, are born visibly intersex.

LGBT: An abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

Lesbian: A woman who is romantically and physically attracted to some other women.

Queer: Traditionally a pejorative term for LGBT people, the word has been reclaimed by some LGBT people to describe themselves. It is not universally accepted within the LGBT community, and if used by heterosexuals who are not allies, it is still often considered derogatory.

Trans or Transgender: Most commonly used as an umbrella term for someone whose self-identification or expression challenges traditional notions of "male" and "female." Transgender people include transsexuals, crossdressers, drag queens and kings, genderqueers, and others who cross traditional gender categories.

Crossdresser: a person who, regardless of motivation, wears clothes, makeup, etc. that are considered by the culture to be appropriate for another gender but not one's own.

Drag King and Drag Queen: A female-to-male crossdresser (typically a lesbian) and a male-to-female crossdresser (typically a gay man), respectively, who present in public, often for entertainment purposes.

Genderqueer: A term used by individuals, especially transgender youth, who identify as neither male nor female, or as both, and who often seek to blur gender lines.

Transsexual: A person whose gender identity is different from their assigned gender at birth. Transsexuals often undergo hormone treatments and gender reassignment surgeries to align their anatomy with their core identity, but not all desire or are able to do so.

Appropriate Social Justice Terminology

Genderism: The societal, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that privilege cisgender or gender-typical people and subordinate and disparage transgender and gender-diverse people. The critical element that differentiates genderism from anti-transgender prejudice and discrimination is the use of institutional power and authority to support prejudice and enforce discriminatory behavior in systematic ways with far-reaching outcomes and effects.

Heterosexism: The societal, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that privilege heterosexuals and subordinate and disparage lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals.

Gender-Normative Privilege: The benefits and advantages that gender-normative people receive in a genderist culture. It also includes the benefits that transgender people receive as a result of claiming a gender-normative identity and denying their transgender selves. There is also **heterosexual privilege**.

Homophobia: The fear, hatred, or intolerance of people who identify or are perceived as lesbian or gay. Homophobia includes the fear of being seen as lesbian or gay and the fear or hatred of one's own attraction to members of the same sex (which is referred to as internalized homophobia). There are also **biphobia** and **transphobia**.

Inappropriate Terminology

Hermaphrodite: An inaccurate clinical term for intersex people. Most intersex activists reject the word because it stigmatizes their experiences and is a mythological fallacy (no one is born fully male and fully female; earthworms and snails are hermaphroditic, not humans).

Homosexual: A clinical term for gay men and sometimes lesbians. Although the word is still frequently used in the media and by some older gay men, it is largely rejected by most members of the gay community because of its anachronistic nature and because of how "homosexuals" were pathologized by the medical profession.

Transvestite: An outdated clinical term for crossdressers. Most crossdressers object to the word because it is commonly understood to describe men who are sexually gratified by wearing traditionally women's clothes, which does not apply to the vast majority of male crossdressers, who are not fetishists. They are simply more comfortable and more themselves in "women's" clothing. The term also does not recognize that women can crossdress too.

What Are Biphobia, Homophobia, and Transphobia?

Examples of Biphobia:

- Assuming that everyone you meet is either heterosexual or lesbian/gay
- Assuming that two women together are lesbian, that two men together are gay, or that a man and a woman together are heterosexual
- Believing that bisexuals are confused or indecisive about their sexuality
- Thinking that bisexuals are promiscuous or cannot live monogamously
- Assuming that bisexuals need at least one male and one female partner
- Thinking that bisexuals are attracted to everyone
- Assuming that people who identify as bisexual are “really” lesbian or gay, but are in denial
- Believing that people who are bisexual spread HIV/AIDS
- Thinking that people identify as bisexual because it is “trendy”
- Not wanting to date someone who is bisexual because you assume that the person will eventually leave you for someone of another gender

Examples of Homophobia:

- Harassing or engaging in violence against individuals who are or are perceived as lesbian or gay
- Denying equal treatment to individuals who are or are perceived as lesbian or gay
- Indicating discomfort or disgust toward individuals who are or are perceived as lesbian or gay
- Feeling repulsed by displays of affection between same-sex couples, but accepting affectionate displays between different-sex couples
- Assuming everyone you meet is heterosexual
- Thinking you can “spot one”
- Using a disparaging phrase such as “that’s so gay”
- Being afraid of social or physical interactions with people who are lesbian or gay
- Avoiding social situations or activities where you might be perceived as lesbian or gay
- Not confronting a homophobic remark for fear of being identified with lesbians or gay men
- Assuming that lesbians and gay men will be attracted to everyone of the same sex

Examples of Transphobia:

- Harassing or engaging in violence against individuals who are or are perceived as transgender
- Denying equal treatment to individuals who are or are perceived as transgender
- Indicating discomfort or disgust toward individuals who are or are perceived as transgender
- Thinking that transsexuals are mentally ill
- Believing that transsexual men and transsexual women aren’t “real” men and women
- Intentionally using inappropriate gender pronouns to refer to transgender people or calling them “it”
- Believing that crossdressing is a sexual perversion or that people who crossdress do so for sexual gratification
- Thinking that identifying as genderqueer is a phase or fad

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How to Be an Ally to LGBT People

- Use the words “gay” and “lesbian” instead of “homosexual.” The overwhelming majority of gay men and lesbians do not identify with or use the word “homosexual” to describe themselves.
- Use non-gender specific language. Ask “Are you seeing someone?” or “Are you in a committed relationship?” instead of “Do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend?” or “Are you married?” Use the word “partner” or “significant other” instead of “boyfriend/girlfriend” or “husband/wife.”
- Do not assume the sexual orientation of another person even when that person is in a committed relationship with someone of a different gender. Many bisexuals, and even some gay men and lesbians, are in different-sex relationships. Also, do not assume that a transgender person is gay or will seek to transition to become heterosexual.
- Do not assume that a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person is attracted to you just because they have disclosed their sexual identity. If any interest is shown, be flattered, not flustered. Treat any interest that someone might show just as you would if it came from someone who is heterosexual.
- Challenge your own conceptions about gender-appropriate roles and behaviors. Do not expect people to conform to society’s beliefs about “women” and “men.”
- Validate people’s gender expression. For example, if a person assigned male at birth identifies as female, refer to that person as “she” and use her chosen name. If you are unsure how to refer to a person’s gender, simply ask that person.
- Speak out against statements and jokes that attack LGBT people. Letting others know that you find anti-LGBT statements and jokes offensive and unacceptable can go a long way toward reducing homo/bi/transphobia.
- Educate yourself about LGBT histories, cultures, and concerns. Read LGBT-themed books and publications and attend LGBT events (you can learn about the LGBT events being held in the Pioneer Valley by subscribing to the Stonewall Center’s QueerE listserv or by going to our website: www.umass.edu/stonewall).
- Support and involve yourself in LGBT organizations and causes. Donate money or volunteer time to LGBT organizations, such as the Stonewall Center. Write letters to your political representatives asking them to support legislation that positively affects LGBT people. Support local LGBT businesses and LGBT-friendly national chain stores (see the Human Rights Campaign’s website for information on LGBT-supportive corporations: www.hrc.org).

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
- ▽ 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 in any state in the U.S.
- ▽ you can automatically receive tax breaks, health and insurance coverage, and spousal legal rights through being in a long-term relationship
- ▽ you can be assured that your basic civil rights will not be denied or outlawed because some people disapprove of 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 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 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

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Myths and Realities of LGBT Life

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

Reality: 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.

▼ **Myth: The majority of child molesters are gay men.**

Reality: 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.

▼ **Myth: Most transgender people identify as lesbians or gay men.**

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

▼ **Myth: "Homosexuality" is unique to humans and is not found elsewhere in nature.**

Reality: Same-sex 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.

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

Reality: Many people identify as bisexual all of their lives. There are probably as many, if not more, 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 sex, and as lesbian or gay when in relationships with people of the same sex.

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

Reality: 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 sex; they just don't act on their feelings. Helping LGBT people to develop a greater level of self-acceptance is a more effective therapy.

▼ **Myth: Most transgender people seek gender reassignment surgery.**

Reality: While some transsexuals take hormones, have electrolysis (for trans women) or mastectomies (for trans men), and undergo genital reconstruction surgeries, others choose none or only some of these procedures, because of the tremendous cost of the surgeries, the mixed results (especially for trans men), and a lack of access to medical care in general. Other transgender people decide not to alter their bodies permanently, but seek to express their gender identities in other ways, such as through crossdressing.

▼ **Myth: Bisexual men are largely responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS to heterosexual women.** Reality: This stereotyping 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.

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

Reality: The cause of sexual identity is unknown. Many studies suggest a genetic or biological 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 developing over time.

▼ **Myth: Most transsexuals are trans women (individuals assigned male at birth who identify as female).** Reality: While trans women have often been more visible in society, it is estimated that there are approximately equal numbers of trans women and trans men.

▼ **Myth: Bisexuals are equally attracted to men and women.**

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

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

Reality: 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 different genders, they must have more sex partners.

▼ **Myth: Providing a young person with information about LGBT people may harm them, or coax them to change their sexuality.**

Reality: It is not providing teens with information that harms them. Because of feeling isolated and lacking resources that would enable them to accept themselves, LGBT 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.

▼ **Myth: Places of worship do not allow openly LGBT people to become members of their congregations.**

Reality: 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 LGBT Metropolitan Community Church. Many churches and synagogues in the Pioneer Valley readily welcome LGBT people as worshippers; some have LGBT clergy and/or perform same-sex marriages.

▼ **Myth: LGBT people are protected under civil rights laws like other groups and are asking for "special rights."**

Reality: In most of the U.S., LGBT people can be fired or not hired and denied housing and access to public facilities simply because of their sexual or gender identity. Only seventeen states and the District of Columbia currently ban discrimination based on sexual orientation, and only seven states and the District of Columbia ban discrimination based on gender identity/expression.