Being an Ally for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People

Here are some guidelines for people wanting to be allies for LGBT people around them. In today's world, LGBT issues are being discussed more than ever before…in the media, in community programs, in schools, churches, offices, in the streets, and in people's homes. These discussions are often emotionally charged as this can be a threatening topic for many people, and clear information is often difficult to find.

Being an ally is important, but it is challenging as well as exciting. This list is not exhaustive, but provides some starting points. Add your own ideas and suggestions!

Don't assume heterosexuality. We tend to assume that everyone we meet is heterosexual even though we know this is not true. Often people hide that they are LGBT until they know it is safe to "come out" in a given situation. Use neutral language when first working with students/clients/customers until you know for certain what the person prefers (for example, the gender of their significant other)

Educate yourself about lesbian, gay, bi, and transgender issues. There are many resources, reading lists, and organizations available for information. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

Explore ways to creatively integrate LGBT issues in your work. Doing so can be a valuable process for everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Integrating LGBT people and issues instead of separating them out as a "special topic" is an important strategy for conveying and creating respect and acceptance.

Challenge stereotypes that others may have about LGBT people, as well as other people in our society. Challenge derogatory remarks or jokes made at the expense of any group, and avoid making them yourself. These remarks reinforce stereotypes and make it seem that prejudice is acceptable.

Examine the effect that sexual orientation and gender identity have on people's lives and development. Explore how race, class, ability, gender, etc intersect with sexual orientation and how multiple identities shape our lives. Explore your own reactions and feelings about LGBT people and issues…including their causes and if there are any you want to change.

Avoid using heterosexist language, such as implying that everyone of one gender dates or marries members of the other gender. Respect how people choose to name themselves. If you don't know how to identify a particular person or group, it is okay to ask as long as you do it respectfully.

Don't expect members of any group that is the target of bias (e.g., LGBT people, Jews, people of color, women, people with disabilities) to be act as the "experts" to educate others about their group. Avoid tokenizing or patronizing people different from yourself.

Encourage and allow disagreement on issues of gender identity, sexual orientation, and civil rights. These issues are highly charged and contentious for many people. If there isn't some disagreement, it probably means that people are hiding their real views or not participating. Keep discussion and disagreements civil and focussed on principles and issues rather than personalities.

Remember that you are human. Allow yourself to not know everything, to make mistakes, and to occasionally be insensitive. Give yourself time to learn, ask questions, and explore your own ideas and feelings…while still setting high expectations for yourself. Extend the same to others. Don't present yourself as an "expert" unless you truly are one.

Ask for support if you are experiencing harassment or other problems related to your raising LGBT issues. You may be labeled as gay, lesbian, bi, transgender whether or not you are. Don't isolate yourself! Make sure you are safe, identify your supporters, and use the opportunity to deepen your understanding of the power of homophobia and heterosexism.

Prepare yourself for a journey of change and growth that will come by exploring sexual orientation, gender identity, heterosexism, and other issues of difference. It can be exciting, painful, and enlightening, and will help you know yourself better. And you'll be improving society in the process!

By learning and speaking out as an ally, you will make the world a safer, more affirming place for everyone. You will change people's lives in ways you'll see and ways you'll never know.