

**The Right To Form Committed, Loving Relationships
And Enter Into Marital Contracts**

Given that all human beings have the right to free expression of self-defined gender identities, and the right to sexual expression as a form of gender expression, all human beings have a corresponding right to form committed, loving relationships with one another, and to enter into marital contracts, regardless of their own or their partner's chromosomal sex, genitalia, assigned birth sex, or initial gender role.

Therefore, individuals shall not be denied the right to form committed, loving relationships with one another or to enter into marital contracts by virtue of their own or their partner's chromosomal sex, genitalia, assigned birth sex, or initial gender role, or on the basis of their expression of a self-defined gender identity.

**The Right To Conceive, Bear, Or Adopt Children;
The Right To Nurture And Have Custody Of Children,
And To Exercise Parental Capacity**

Given the right to form a committed, loving relationship with another person, and to enter into marital contracts, together with the right to express a self-defined gender identity and the right to sexual expression, individuals have a corresponding right to conceive and bear children, to adopt children, to nurture children, to have custody of children, and to exercise parental capacity with respect to children, natural or adopted, without regard to chromosomal sex, genitalia, assigned birth sex, or initial gender role, or by virtue of a self-defined gender identity or the expression thereof.

Therefore individuals shall not be denied the right to conceive, bear, or adopt children, nor to nurture and have custody of children, nor to exercise parental capacity with respect to children, natural or adopted, on the basis of their own, their partner's, or their children's chromosomal sex, genitalia, assigned birth sex, initial gender role, or by virtue of a self-defined gender identity or the expression thereof.

American Language (1966), an ally is “someone joined with another for a common purpose” (41). This definition serves as a starting point for developing a working definition of *ally* as this term relates to issues of oppression. In this essay, we will define *ally* as “a person who is a member of the ‘dominant’ or ‘majority’ group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for, the oppressed population.”

The rationale behind this definition is that although an oppressed person can certainly be a supporter and advocate for his or her own group, the impact and effect of such activity are different on the dominant group, and are often more powerful when the supporter is not a member of the oppressed population. Understanding this notion is an important first step toward becoming an ally for any “targeted” or oppressed group. Given our definition, only heterosexual individuals can serve as allies of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.

This chapter explores factors associated with becoming an ally of LGBT individuals, including the importance of recognizing heterosexual privilege, motivations for becoming an ally, the practice of advocacy, what an ally should know, and positive and negative consequences of advocacy.

Heterosexual Privilege

The individual who decides to undertake the ally role must recognize and understand the power and privileges that one receives, accepts, and experiences as a heterosexual person. Developing this awareness is often the most painful part of the process of becoming an ally. Janet Helms (1984) wrote about this stage of identity development for majority groups as it relates to racism, labeling it the *disintegration* stage. Although this theory is based on the development of whites or European Americans as “dominants,” there are some similarities with other dominant positions in this country. Some of these similarities exist around feelings of anger and guilt.

When heterosexual persons first learn that their lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender friends are truly mistreated on the basis of sexual or gender identity, they often feel anger toward heterosexuals and guilt toward themselves for being members of the same group. This process can only happen, however, when persons have an understanding of sexual and gender identity and do not see it as grounds for discrimination, violence, or abuse. These feelings do not occur when the person still believes that a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person is sick sinners who either needs to have a good sexual relationship with a person of the other sex or see a psychologist or a spiritual leader so that they can be cured. Such persons, who might be classified as being at the lowest level of development according to Helms’s majority-group identity model, are not yet ready to start down the ally road.

Some of the powers and privileges heterosexuals generally have that gay and lesbian, and in some cases bisexual persons do *not* have include:

- Family memberships to health clubs, pools, and other recreational facilities
- Legalized marriage
- The purchase of property as an acknowledged same-sex couple
- Filing joint income tax returns
- The ability to adopt children
- Health insurance for one’s life partner

- Decisions on health-related issues as they relate to one's life partner
- The assumption that one is psychologically healthy

In addition to such tangible privileges of the heterosexual population, there are a great many other, not so tangible, privileges. One important intangible privilege is living one's life without the fear that people will find out that who one falls in love with, dreams about, or makes love to is someone of the same sex. This fear affects the lives of gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons from the day they first begin to have "those funny feelings" until the day they die. Although many LGBT persons overcome that fear and turn the fear into a positive component of their lives, they have still been affected, and those wounds, even after healed, can easily be reopened.

Coming to terms with the very fact that "as a heterosexual I do not experience the world in the same way as LGBT people do" is an important step in becoming an ally. This awareness begins to move the heterosexual from being a caring, liberal person who feels that we are all created equal and should be treated as such, toward being an ally who begins to realize that although equality and equity are goals that have not yet been achieved, they can have a role in helping to make these goals realities.

Motivations for Becoming an Advocate

What motivates heterosexuals to become LGBT rights advocates? There are certainly more popular and less controversial causes with which one can become involved. Since involvement in LGBT rights advocacy is often deemed a moral issue, moral development theory suggests some possible underlying reasons for such activity. Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) has hypothesized that moral reasoning develops through three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. At the pre-conventional level, moral decisions are based on what is good for the individual. Persons functioning at this level may choose to be involved in gay rights issues to protect their own interests or to get something out of such involvement (e.g., if this issue is particularly important to a supervisor whose approval is sought).

At the conventional level, Kohlberg indicated that decisions are made that conform to the norms of one's group or society. Individuals at this level may work for gay rights if they wish to support friends who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, or to uphold an existing institutional policy of nondiscrimination.

Kohlberg's third level of reasoning involves decision making based on principles of justice. At this level the individual takes an active role to create policies that assure that all people are treated fairly and becomes involved in gay rights advocacy because it is the right thing to do.

Although Kohlberg focused on justice as the basis of moral decision making, Carol Gilligan (1982) used the principle of care as the basis of her model of moral reasoning. Her three levels of reasoning are (1) taking care of oneself, (2) taking care of others, and (3) supporting positions that take into consideration the impact on *both* oneself and others. Using this model, individuals at the first level become advocates to make themselves look good to others or to protect themselves from criticism for not getting involved. At the second level, individuals reason that they should "take care of" LGBT people. The final perspective leads individuals to believe that equality and respect for differences create a better world for everyone, and that these are worthwhile goals.

One could argue that the latter position in Kohlberg's and Gilligan's scheme is the enlightened perspective that any advocate needs to espouse. We should, however, be aware that not every person is functioning at a post-conventional level of moral reasoning, and that arguments designed to encourage people to commit themselves to gay rights

advocacy need to be targeted to the level that the individual can understand and accept. Kohlberg (1972) indicated that active involvement in addressing moral issues is an important factor in facilitating moral development along his stages. We can, therefore, expect that as people become involved in LGBT rights issues, their levels of reasoning may move toward postconventional levels.

Advocacy in Action

Advocacy can take a number of different forms and target various audiences. Heterosexual supporters may focus some of their energy toward LGBT individuals themselves. At other times the target may be other heterosexuals, and often strategies developed for college and university campuses are focused on the campus community as a whole.

Advocacy with LGBT people involves acceptance, support, and inclusiveness. Examples of acceptance include listening in a nonjudgmental way and valuing the unique qualities of each individual. Support includes such behaviors as championing the hiring of LGBT staff; providing an atmosphere in which LGBT issues can be discussed in training or programming; or attending events sponsored by LGBT student organizations. Inclusiveness involves activities such as the use of nonexclusionary language; publications, fliers, and handbooks that take into account sexual and gender identity differences; and sensitivity to the possibility that not everyone in a student organization or work setting is heterosexual.

Being an advocate among other heterosexuals is often challenging. Such a position involves modeling advocacy, support, and confronting inappropriate behavior. In this context, heterosexual supporters model nonheterosexist behaviors such as being equally physical with men and women, avoiding joking or teasing someone for nontraditional gender behaviors, and avoiding making a point of being heterosexual. Allies are spokespersons for addressing LGBT issues proactively in program and policy development. Confronting such things as heterosexist joke telling; the exclusion of LGBT people either intentionally or by using language that assumes heterosexuality; discriminatory hiring practices; or the evaluation of staff based on factors related to their sexual or gender identities is also part of the role of the advocate.

Advocacy in the institution involves making sure that issues facing LGBT students and staff are acknowledged and addressed. This goal is accomplished by developing and promoting educational efforts that raise the awareness level and increase the sensitivity of heterosexual students, staff, and faculty on campus. Such activities include inviting speakers to address topics relevant to the LGBT community; developing panel discussions on issues related to sexual and gender identities; including LGBT issues as a topic in dormitory resident advisor training programs; and promoting plays and movies featuring LGBT themes.

Encouraging LGBT student and staff organizations is also part of institutional advocacy. Such groups need to have access to the same campus resources, funding, and sponsorship as other student and staff organizations. Developing and supporting pro-gay, prolesbian, probisexual, protransgender policies are also a necessary aspect of advocacy. Antiharassment policies, antidiscriminatory hiring policies, and provisions for nonheterosexual couples to live together in campus housing are arenas that deserve attention.

Things You Should Know as an Ally

When dealing with issues of oppression, there are four basic levels of becoming an ally. The following examples relate specifically to being an ally to LGBT persons.

- *Awareness* is the first level. It is important to become more aware of who you are and how you are different from and similar to LGBT people. Such awareness can be gained through conversations with LGBT individuals, attending awareness-building workshops, reading about LGBT life, and self-examination.
- *Knowledge/education* is the second level. You must begin to acquire knowledge about sexual and gender identities and the experiences of LGBT people. This step includes learning about laws, policies, and practices and how they affect LGBT people, in addition to educating yourself about LGBT culture and the norms of this community. Contacting local and national LGBT organizations for information can be very helpful.
- *Skills* make up the third level. This area is the one in which people often fall short because of fear, or lack of resources or supports. You must develop skills in communicating the knowledge that you have learned. These skills can be acquired by attending workshops, role-playing certain situations with friends, developing support connections, or practicing interventions or awareness raising in safe settings—for example, a restaurant or hotel out of your hometown.
- *Action* is the last, but most important, level and is the most frightening step. There are many challenges and liabilities for heterosexuals in taking actions to end the oppression of LGBT people, and some are addressed in this chapter's discussion of factors that discourage advocacy. Nonetheless, action is, without a doubt, the only way that we can effect change in the society as a whole; for if we keep our awareness, knowledge, and skills to ourselves, we deprive the rest of the world of what we have learned, thus keeping them from having the fullest possible life.

In addition to the four levels in ally development, there are five additional points to keep in mind:

1. Have a good understanding of sexual and gender identities and be aware of and comfortable with your own. If you are a person who chooses not to identify with a particular sexual or gender identity, be comfortable with that decision, but recognize that others, particularly LGBT people, may see your stance as a cop-out.
2. Talk with LGBT people and read about the coming-out process. This is a process and experience that is unique to this oppressed group. No other population of oppressed persons needs to disclose so much to family and close friends in the same way. Because of its uniqueness, this process brings challenges that are often not understood.
3. As any other oppressed group, the LGBT population gets the same messages about homosexuality, bisexuality, and gender expression as everyone else. As such, there is a great deal of internalized heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia. There are LGBT people who believe that what they do in bed is nobody's business, and that being an "out" lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person to them would mean forcing their sexual practices on the general society, something they feel should not be done. It is, therefore, very important not only to be supportive, recognizing that you do not share the same level of personal risk as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person, but also to challenge some of the internalized oppressive notions, thus helping to develop a different, more positive, perspective.
4. As with most oppressed groups, there is diversity within the LGBT community. Heterosexism is an area of oppression that cuts across, but is not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, culture, age, and level of physical or mental ability.

For all of these categories, there are different challenges. Certainly, LGBT individuals as members of these diverse populations share some common joys and concerns; however, issues often manifest themselves in very different ways in different groups, thus calling for different strategies and interventions.

5. It is difficult to enter into a discussion about heterosexism and homophobia without the topic of AIDS/HIV infection arising. Knowing at least basic information about the illness is necessary for two reasons: (1) to address myths and misinformation related to AIDS and the LGBT community, and (2) to be supportive of the members of the community affected by this disease. Although we recognize that AIDS is a health issue that has and will continue to affect our entire world, the persons who live in the most fear and have lost the most members of their community are LGBT individuals. Accepting that reality helps an ally to understand the intense emotions that surround this issue within the community.

These five points and the previous four levels of awareness provide some guidelines for becoming an effective ally. And although we recognize that these concepts seem fairly reasonable, there are some real challenges or factors that can discourage an ally from taking these steps.

Factors That Discourage Advocacy

Involvement in LGBT rights advocacy can be a scary and unpopular activity. Individuals who wish to take on such a role must be aware of and reconcile themselves to several potentially unpleasant outcomes. Some of these problems involve reactions from other heterosexuals, and some come from members of the LGBT community.

An assumption often is automatically made within the heterosexual community that anyone supporting gay rights is automatically gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Although such an identity is not negative, such labeling can create problems, especially for unmarried heterosexuals who might wish to become involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship. Heterosexuals also often experience derisive comments from other heterosexuals concerning involvement in a cause that is viewed as unimportant, unacceptable, or unpopular. Friends and colleagues who are uncomfortable with the topic may become alienated from the heterosexual supporter of LGBT rights, or may noticeably distance themselves from the individual. Difficulty may arise in social situations if the heterosexual ally is seen in the company of LGBT individuals. Discrimination, either overt or subtle, may also result from getting involved in controversial causes. Such discrimination may take the form of poor evaluations, failure to be appointed to important committees, or encouragement to seek a position at a school "more supportive of your ideas."

The LGBT community may also have trouble accepting the heterosexual ally. Often an assumption is made that such persons are really gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender but not yet accepting of their identity. Subtle or not-so-subtle pressure is placed on such people to come out or at least to consider the possibility of a nonheterosexual identity.

The LGBT community is one that has its own language and culture. Heterosexual supporters can feel out of place and awkward in settings populated exclusively or mainly by gay males, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people. LGBT people may be exclusionary in their conversations and activities, leaving the heterosexual ally out of the picture. Since most LGBT people have had mainly negative experiences with heterosexuals in the past, the motives of heterosexuals involved in LGBT rights activities are often questioned. These experiences make it difficult for LGBT people to accept that individuals will involve themselves in a controversial and unpopular cause just because it is "right."

The Benefits of Being an Ally

Although the factors that discourage individuals from being an ally are very real, there are many benefits of being an ally. What are these benefits?

1. You open yourself up to the possibility of close relationships with an additional percentage of the world.
2. You become less locked into sex-role stereotypes.
3. You increase your ability to have close and loving relationships with same-sex friends.
4. You have opportunities to learn from, teach, and have an impact on a population with whom you might not otherwise interact.
5. You may be the reason a family member, coworker, or community member finally decides that life is worth something and that dependence on chemicals or other substances might not be the answer.
6. You may make the difference in the lives of adolescents who hear you confront anti-LGBT epithets that make them feel as if they want to drop out of junior high, high school, or college. As a result of your action, they know they have a friend to turn to.
7. Lastly, you can get invited to some of the most fun parties, have some of the best foods, play some of the best sports, have some of the best intellectual discussions, and experience some of the best music in the world, because everyone knows that LGBT people are good at all these things.

Although the last factor (7) is meant as a joke, there is a great deal of truth concerning the positive experiences to which persons open themselves when they allow themselves to be a part of and include another segment of the population in their world. Imagine what it could be like to have had such close friends as Tennessee Williams, Cole Porter, Bessie Smith, Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, or Virginia Woolf. Imagine the world without their contributions. It is possible for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, as well as heterosexuals, to make a difference in the way the world is, but we must start by realizing the equity in our humanness and life experiences.

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