

“What Should I Do If...?": Answers to Commonly Asked Ally Questions

How can I tell if someone I know is lesbian, gay, or bisexual?

Ultimately, the only way to tell if a person is lesbian, gay, or bisexual is if that person tells you so. Many lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals don't fit the common stereotypes, and many people who fit the stereotypes aren't lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Assumptions on your part can be misguided. The important thing to remember is that it is very likely that someone you interact with on campus is lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and to try to be sensitive to that fact.

What should I do if I think someone is lesbian, gay, or bisexual, but they haven't told me?

Again, remember that assumptions on your part may be inaccurate. The best approach is to create an atmosphere where that individual can feel comfortable coming out to you. You can do this by making sure that you are open and approachable and by giving indications that you are comfortable with this topic and are supportive of lesbian, gay, and bisexual concerns. If the person is already out to themselves, and they feel that you are worthy of their trust, then they may tell you. If the person seems to be in conflict about something, it may or may not be because of their sexuality. In this case, it is best simply to make sure that they know you are there if they need to talk. Remember, they may not have told you because they don't want you to know.

How do I make myself more approachable to people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual?

Demonstrate that you are comfortable with topics related to sexual orientation and that you are supportive of lesbian, gay, and bisexual concerns. Be sensitive to the assumptions you make about people—try not to assume that everyone you interact with is heterosexual, that they have a partner of a different gender, etc. Try to use inclusive language, such as by avoiding the use of pronouns that assume the gender of someone's partner or friends. Be a role model by confronting others who make homophobic jokes or remarks. Become knowledgeable about lesbian, gay, and bisexual concerns by reading books and attending meetings and activities sponsored by LGB organizations.

What kinds of things might a person who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual go through when coming out?

Because of the difficulty of growing up in a largely homophobic society, people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual may experience guilt, isolation, depression, suicidal feelings, and low self-esteem. As LGB people become more in touch with their sexual orientation, they may experience any number of these thoughts and feelings to some degree. On the positive side, coming out can be an extremely liberating experience, as lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals learn who they are, gain respect for themselves, and find friends to relate to. Coming out to others can be an anxious process, as the individual worries about rejection, ridicule, and the possible loss of family, friends, and employment. For students, college life is already stress filled,

and adding the process of grappling with one's sexual identity to that mix can be overwhelming.

If someone wants advice on what to tell their roommate, friends, or family about being lesbian, gay, or bisexual, how can I help?

Remember that the individual must decide for themselves when and to whom they will reveal their sexual identity. Don't tell someone to take any particular action; the person could hold you responsible if it doesn't go well. Do listen carefully, reflect on the concerns and feelings you hear expressed, and suggest available resources for support. Help the person think through the possible outcomes of coming out. Support the person's decision even if you don't agree with it, and ask about the outcomes of any action taken.

What do I do if someone who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual wants to come out in my office, on my residence hall floor, or within the context of any other group I am a part of?

Again, help the individual think through the possible outcomes. Discuss how others might react and how the person might respond to those reactions. Mention the option of coming out to a few people at a time, as opposed to the entire group. If someone has decided to come out, let them know you will support them. Suggest additional resources such as PFLAG, support groups, resource centers, or other materials that may help their coming out process.

How should I respond to heterosexual friends or coworkers who feel negatively about a person who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual in our office, on our residence hall floor, or in any group I am a part of?

When such problems arise, it is most useful to discuss this with the people involved. Help them to see that they are talking about a person, not just a sexual orientation. Make sure that you have accurate information so that you may appropriately discuss the myths and stereotypes that often underlie such negative reactions. Note the similarities between LGB people and heterosexual people. Be clear with others that while they have a right to their own beliefs and opinions, you will not tolerate anti-gay comments or discrimination. Remember that others may take their cues from you—if you are uncomfortable with, hostile to, or ignore someone who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual, others may follow suit. Conversely, if you are friendly with the person and treat them with respect, others may follow suit.

What should I say to someone who is afraid of contracting HIV/AIDS from LGB people?

HIV is not transmitted through ordinary social contact. It is necessary for everyone to be knowledgeable about HIV and AIDS. If a friend or coworker is afraid and uninformed, use this as an educational opportunity. The MU Student Health Center or Sexual Health Advocacy Peer Education (SHAPE) can provide you with pamphlets and other resources containing current and accurate information.

How can I support LGB people without my own sexual orientation becoming an issue?

Be aware that if you speak out about issues related to sexual orientation, some people may take this as an indication of your own sexual orientation. Take time in

advance to think through how you might respond to this. How do you feel about your own sexual identity? Are you comfortable with yourself? Regardless of your sexual orientation, a confidence in your own self-image will make you less vulnerable.

How should I respond to rumors that someone is lesbian, gay, or bisexual?

Let others know that the sexual orientation of any individual is irrelevant unless that person wishes to disclose that information. If you can, address any myths or stereotypes that may be fueling such speculation. If a particular person continues to spread rumors, talk to that person individually.

How can I get others to be more open-minded about LGBT people?

In brief, be a role model for others by being open and visible in your support. Share your beliefs with others when appropriate. When LGBT topics come up, talk about them, don't simply avoid them. Show that you are comfortable talking about these issues, and comfortable with LGBT people. Remember that part of your goal as an ally is to create bridges across differences and to increase understanding. While you may be motivated to share your views with others, be careful of being self-righteous; others can't learn from you if they are turned off from listening to begin with. Of course, your views are more convincing if they are supported by sound knowledge. Take the time to educate yourself so that you know what you are talking about.

How can I respond when someone tells a homophobic joke?

Many people believe that jokes are harmless and get upset by what they perceive as the "politically correct" attitudes of those who are offended by inappropriate humor. Labeling a belief as "politically correct" is a subtle way of supporting the status quo and resisting change. Most people who tell jokes about an oppressed group have never thought about how those jokes perpetuate stereotypes, or how they teach and reinforce prejudice. Someone who tells jokes about LGBT people probably assumes that everyone present is heterosexual, or at least that everyone shares their negative attitudes toward LGBT people. However, most people do not tell jokes to purposefully hurt or embarrass others, and will stop if they realize this is the effect. Responding assertively in these situations is difficult, but not responding at all sends a silent message of agreement. No response is the equivalent of condoning the telling of such jokes. It is important to remember that young people, particularly those questioning their own sexual identity, will watch to see who laughs at such jokes, and may internalize the hurtful message. In some instances, the inappropriateness of the joke could be mentioned at the time. In other situations, the person could be taken aside afterward. Try to communicate your concerns about the joke with respect.

How can I respond to homophobic attitudes?

If you disagree with a negative statement someone makes about LGBT people, the assertive thing to do is to say so. Again, silence communicates agreement. Remember what your goal is in responding: not to start an argument or foster hostility, but to attempt to increase understanding. Disagreement can be civil and

respectful. Share your views without accusing or criticizing. You are simply presenting another way of thinking about the topic. It can be difficult to speak out in support of LGBT people. You might be afraid that others will question your sexual orientation, morals, and values, or that you will be ostracized. It is easy to forget that there might be positive effects of your outspokenness as well.

How can I respond to people who object to LGBT people for religious reasons?

Usually, there is no way to change the minds of individuals who base their negative beliefs about LGBT people on strict religious convictions. However, while respecting their right to believe as they wish, you can share some information with them. Concerning “conflicts” between LGBT people and Christianity, It can be useful to point out that identifying as Christian is not necessarily incompatible with being supportive of LGBT people. There is a great deal of diversity among the Christian community with regard to beliefs about same-gender sexuality. In addition there is much disagreement about the Biblical basis for condemning LGBT people. Many religious scholars argue that the Biblical passages which are said to refer to same-gender sexuality have been misinterpreted. It is also important to point out that while individuals are entitled to their personal religious beliefs, these opinions should not be used to deny LGBT people equal treatment under the law.

Adapted from the Northern Illinois University Safe Zone Program

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