

What is Homophobia?

Homophobia

An intense, irrational fear of lesbians and gay men, and the hatred, disgust, and prejudice fostered by that fear. The term is widely used to describe any belief or behavior that indicates fear or hatred of lesbians and gay men.

Homophobia can be experienced at several levels:

- the fear or hatred of persons who are lesbian or gay
- the fear of being perceived as lesbian or gay
- the fear or hatred of one's own attraction to members of the same gender (which is referred to as internalized homophobia)

The fear and hatred which comprise homophobia can be expressed through a variety of prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory actions, such as:

- indicating discomfort or disgust toward individuals who are or are perceived as lesbian or gay
- denying equal treatment to individuals who are or are perceived as lesbian or gay
- harassing or engaging in violence against individuals who are or are perceived as lesbian or gay

Examples of Homophobia:

- Making assumptions about a person being lesbian or gay based on dress, behavior, or personality.
- Feeling repulsed by displays of affection between same-gender couples, but accepting affectionate displays between different-gender couples.
- Thinking of people who are lesbian and gay only in terms of their sexuality, rather than as whole, complex persons.
- 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.
- Assuming that lesbians and gay men will be attracted to everyone of the same gender.

How Homophobia Hurts Everyone

You do not have to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual, or know someone who is, to be negatively affected by homophobia. Though homophobia actively oppresses lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, it also hurts heterosexuals.

- Homophobia inhibits the ability of heterosexuals to form close, intimate relationships with members of their own gender for fear of being perceived as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
- Homophobia locks people into rigid gender-based roles that restrict creativity and self-expression.
- Homophobia pushes heterosexual men to constantly prove their masculinity,
- Homophobia results in "lesbian baiting" (an accusatory charge of lesbianism) being used to control women's autonomy and to question their femininity.
- Homophobia is often used to stigmatize heterosexuals who are perceived by others as lesbian, gay, or bisexual or who are a friend or relative of someone who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
- Homophobia compromises human integrity by pressuring people to treat others badly, actions that serve to diminish their basic humanity.
- Homophobia, combined with sexual taboos, results in the invisibility or erasure of the lives and sexuality of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals in school-based sex education discussions, keeping vital information from students. Such erasures can contribute to the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.
- Homophobia deters individuals from taking part in certain social activities. People who are heterosexual are discouraged from participating in lesbian- and gay identified activities for fear of being labeled.
- Homophobia pressures young people to become heterosexually active to prove to themselves and others that they are "normal." This premature sexual involvement can result in emotional distress, as well as increases the chance of teen pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.
- Homophobia prevents some lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals from developing an authentic self-identity and adds to the pressure to many. This can be traumatic not only for themselves, but also for their heterosexual spouses and children, should they feel compelled to get married

- Homophobia inhibits appreciation of other types of diversity, making it unsafe for everyone, because each person has unique traits not considered mainstream or dominant. We are all diminished when any one of us is demeaned.

By challenging homophobia, people are not only fighting the oppression of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, but are also striving for a society that accepts and celebrates the differences in all of us.

Adapted from Warren J. Blumenfeld, *Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price* (Boston: Beacon Press. 1992)