

The Simple Guide to being an Ally for Equal Rights

Individual Voices can make a difference by:

**Being inclusive
Celebrating difference
Speaking Up which empowers others
Advocating for rights**

The guide to being an ally is an invitation and opportunity for people who believe in equality for all Australians and their loved ones including the lesbian and gay couples living in our community.

Many of us believe in gay rights or equality of same-sex attracted couples but don't know how to be supportive. Through education and awareness the information in this brochure will empower the straight/ heterosexual community to support lesbians and gays and their need for equality.

The lesbian and gay community cannot achieve equality without support from energetic, compassionate and dedicated straight allies. We know there are a variety of barriers that may keep people from getting involved, and that's why we have printed this resource. Reading this resource is the first step in becoming an ally for equal rights.

Some may feel this issue has nothing to do with them because they are straight. Others believe they have never met someone who is gay or lesbian. Often the lesbian or gay person may at times choose, for many reasons, to not disclose their sexual orientation and we are none the wiser. Nonetheless, research shows that most people at least know of someone who is same-sex attracted and as many as 40% report they have friends or relatives who are same-sex attracted.

Being an ally for equal rights isn't necessary about politics or politicians, radical activists or peacekeeping pacifists.

It is about creating a place where all people who care about others and equality can begin to make a difference by just a few simple actions. By doing this we can learn how to assist others, whether they be friends, family, co-workers or community members.

Getting started is easy. Here are five ways to start moving equality forward for the gay and lesbian community today.

STEP ONE: EDUCATE YOURSELF

Not sure what to call someone who is same-sex attracted?

Don't know what's going on with lesbian and gay issues?

Confused about definitions?

Concerned that you may say something that is going to offend?

If the answer is “yes” to any of these, be honest, say that you don’t understand and ask if it’s alright to discuss your queries.

One of the best ways we can demonstrate interest in becoming an ally is to:

- become informed
- ask questions
- do research

Our lesbian and gay friends, neighbours and co-workers are not so different from us, but there are differences that we need to know, so that we can help others to understand.

- If you hear about a lesbian and gay issue on the news that you don’t understand - do some simple research or if you have a lesbian or gay friend ask them.
- If a lesbian or gay person uses a term that you don’t understand - ask what it means.

Your lesbian and gay friends and colleagues will be pretty impressed that you took an interest in wanting to say the right thing or understand what is going on!

If you don’t feel comfortable asking directly (that’s ok), as you may think it’s too personal. There are many ways to find out information:

- online
- libraries
- lesbian and gay organisations to phone - just look in the phone book or go on line.

So whether you are looking up information online, going to the library` or having a real one-on-one conversation, educating yourself on lesbian and gay issues is the first step in becoming an ally.

STEP TWO: SPEAK UP AND SPEAK OUT

Everyone’s been there. Whether it’s a racist, sexist or gay joke we often stay quiet and don’t speak up about it being inappropriate. We knew something should have been said but we just.....didn’t.

Step two is speaking up about inappropriate humour and jokes directed at lesbians and gays, as well as statements based on inaccurate stereotyping. Too often these comments are let slide.

We will never know how many people have chosen not to ‘come out’ at work or at home because this continues to be an acceptable form of entertainment or conversation.

Another fear or concern is for the parent who has a lesbian daughter or gay son but doesn't respond to these types of comments because they are afraid of their peers' contempt.

Our speaking up empowers these people and ourselves. We need to remember silence condones inappropriate behaviour.

When we hear someone crack a gay joke or make a comment based on a stereotype (He dresses well, he must be gay!), just say something like "How would you feel if...." or "I'm not sure you know this but.....".

My personal favourite is "**I have gay friends and family and I don't like what you're saying**". I have found this makes people stop and think before they again make this type of comment.

Most times, people make inappropriate comments just because they can. However, speaking up reminds people to be more aware and sensitive to those around them and it eventually changes minds. The more we do this, the less it has to be done.

STEP THREE: BE HONEST

When we talk about our lesbian and gay co-workers and acquaintances, we should include all of the facts not just the ones we think people want to hear.

If they have a partner tell people they have a partner (but find out if that is the term they would like you to use first!)

We should never assume we are going to offend someone or have to hold an uncomfortable conversation. More often than not, most people would like to know more.

People are often curious, even if they don't agree with what you have to say - it certainly wouldn't be the first time we have had a difference of opinion with someone!

As straight allies we can make the difference by encouraging opportunities, for people to learn more about lesbians and gays and the inequalities they live with on a daily basis.

STEP FOUR: SUPPORT EQUALITY

Places such as at work, the local school, university and at home are just a few areas where a straight ally can express his/her support in tiny ways to friends and family. The places are limitless.

Often our voices carry tremendous weight where the voices of lesbians and gays cannot.

We bring a different perspective to the conversation, our insistence for equality is different – **It is not about you/us, it is about others, and about doing the right thing.**

As the saying goes – Small things matter.

Presently, many lesbians and gays report that homophobic attitudes are still prevalent which means they are fearful to be honest at work. This push into the closet creates tension, stress and less effective and meaningful connections among colleagues.

It is important to realise that in standing up for change, there will be people just as vocal as you who will argue against this change. If you support your lesbian and gay friends or simply equality for all Australians then eventually fairness will prevail.

STEP FIVE: LETTING PEOPLE KNOW

By now you have information, spoken up, been honest and supported equality. You may have some concerns that people will think you are gay. Just clarify that you are a straight ally or let them assume otherwise. It's up to you.

Let everyone know that they can become a straight ally too. You don't even have to know a lesbian or gay person.

Although attempting and continuing with all five steps is ideal, just attempting one or two steps can help make a big difference. You only have to do what you are comfortable with.

SOME PEOPLE WANT TO TAKE THEIR VOICE AS STRAIGHT ALLIES FURTHER

Remember you have the power to change things further.

You can vote for people who are LGBT friendly into power.
Before you vote:

- ask the candidates their beliefs about lesbian and gay rights
- or telephone your members of State and Federal government and let them know that you expect them to vote for the removal of discriminatory legislation affecting the lesbian and gay community.
- or you can lobby government for changes to laws by writing letters to several politicians (they do listen and your phone calls and letters will count)

You can talk to people generally about the discrimination that the lesbian and gay community experience.

People will discover the more they read the more they will believe in the need for change and will feel more comfortable discussing these issues with others.

What's in it for you?

You will know that you have helped the general community become less homophobic and fearful.

You will know that you have made a positive difference to lesbian and gay workers or friends, who know that you are supportive.

You will know that you have become an advocate for change.

What workplace management can do:

- Recognise the partners in social settings
- Allow time off for sick children, the same as for heterosexual parents
- Encourage the lesbian or gay person to be part of the water cooler set
- Treat the lesbian or gay person with the same respect and dignity as any other worker
- Give them the same allowances, benefits and perks heterosexual couples receive.
- Include the partners and provide them the same respect and dignity as any other couple in the workplace.

They don't want special rights just equal rights.

What we as individuals can do:

- Make positive comments about lesbians and gays
- Be supportive if you feel they are being discriminated against
- Never condone gay jokes or the trivialising of lesbians and gays
- Never be condescending – for example, never assume “they are all lovely”, neat or artistic
- Ask about their weekends, friends, what they like to do
- Be inclusive of them with your friends when possible

Lesbians and gays don't want to be treated differently. They just want equality.

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