

TALKING ABOUT



Overall Approaches for LGBT Issues



Authors



Contributing Editors

Overview

Effective discussions about social issues frame what those issues are about in authentic, emotionally compelling ways that resonate with people's values. In talking about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues, we recommend basing your discussions on the following statement of meaning:

This is about everyday Americans who want the same chance as everyone else to earn a living, be safe in their communities, serve their country, and take care of the ones they love.

Notice that words like "gay" and "transgender" don't appear in the statement you just read. That's because this isn't just about gay people. It's not just about transgender people. And it's not just about straight people. It's about all of us.

When conversations about these issues are rooted in the common ground we share—when we emphasize the values, hopes, and dreams we have in common, instead of our differences—it's difficult to cast gay people as being "other," "different," or "not like me." It also makes it more difficult for Americans to dismiss the harms and injustices that LGBT people face.

Emphasize Common Ground

Some Americans aren't sure whether to support equality for gay people because they erroneously believe that gay people are very different from straight people. However, despite media stereotypes, gay people live ordinary lives. They are coworkers, neighbors, family members and friends. They work, pay taxes, do the

laundry, celebrate birthdays, and take out the trash. Like straight people, gay people want to earn a living, be safe in their communities, serve their country, and take care of the ones they love. Drawing these parallels helps create an emotional connection—and helps Americans understand that the lives and values of straight and gay people aren't meaningfully different.

Use the language of common values, beliefs, hopes, and dreams. Family. Hard work. Responsibility. Commitment. Sacrifice. Duty. These are a few of the values LGBT people share with straight Americans. Talking generally about "rights," "benefits," and "what gay people deserve" does not help people understand either the issues or the importance of supporting them. Use the language of values to show that LGBT people understand and prioritize their obligations to others—to their loved ones, their families, their friends, their neighbors, their communities, and their country.

Make your conversations about people and storytelling, not policies. Most Americans aren't policy wonks. Complicated legal concepts and policy distinctions make people tune out or retreat into their existing way of thinking. Instead, talk about people.

Tell emotionally compelling stories that draw attention to committed couples who have taken care of each other in sickness and in health, or show gay and transgender employees providing for their families and loved ones. Help Americans see gay people as part of the American fold.

Overall Approaches for Talking About LGBT Issues

"This is about everyday Americans who want the same chance as everyone else to earn a living, be safe in their communities, serve their country, and take care of the ones they love."

Emphasize common ground

- Use the language of common values, beliefs, hopes, and dreams.
- Make it about people and their stories, not policies.
- Remind people that gay people are everyday Americans who live ordinary lives—neighbors, coworkers and friends who also walk the dog, mow the lawn, etc.

Illustrate concrete harms

- Avoid abstract "rights" language.
- Make it clear that existing laws don't protect LGBT people.
- Focus on a few meaningful injustices.
- Illustrate injustices with personal stories.

Illustrate Concrete Harms

Most Americans simply don't understand the inequalities LGBT people face. For example, many Americans mistakenly believe that gay couples wouldn't need to get married if they'd just get a power of attorney. They don't understand that it's still legal to unfairly fire gay and transgender people in most states—despite the fact that Gallup polling shows that 89% of Americans support employment protections for gay people. They don't realize that LGBT people are targeted for hate violence simply because of who they are. Before more Americans support equality for LGBT people, they need to understand the extent of the problem.

Avoid abstract “rights” language. Talking generically about the need for equal rights doesn't help Americans understand the injustices LGBT people face. Instead of talking about “equality” or “rights” in the abstract, focus on illustrating the problem.

Make it clear when and how existing laws don't cover LGBT people. Don't assume the public understands the issues; it's very likely they don't. Be specific. For example, it's legal in 30 states to fire someone just because they're gay, and in 37 states because they're transgender. It's also legal in these states to deny housing to gay and transgender people. Denying marriage to gay couples means they can't pass their Social Security benefits or pensions on to each other in old age, visit each other in the hospital, or take personal leave if their partner becomes ill. Don't Ask, Don't Tell means that gay people who put their lives on the line for their country are dishonorably discharged for no other reason than their orientation.

Focus on a few meaningful injustices and illustrate them with personal stories. Focus on concrete injustices that all Americans can relate to and empathize with. For example, rather than talking generically about employment protections, help people understand what it's like to live each day with the fear of being fired because you're gay. For marriage, talk about end-of-life decision making rather than the 1,138 federal benefits of marriage. And offer real-world stories about those who have experienced these injustices.

Effective Conversation Principles

Help people see injustices through their own eyes. When discussions start off with straight people being asked to consider a scenario like, “Imagine you were gay and you were denied housing,” they can get stuck. Why? Because many people don't think they can imagine what it's like to be gay. There is an easy way around this. People don't have to imagine they're gay before they can imagine how certain situations make gay people feel. So, instead of asking a straight person to put themselves in

ACKNOWLEDGE THE DISCOMFORT, NOT THE ATTITUDES

Be aware of an important distinction! Acknowledging a person's discomfort is important, but don't inadvertently validate anti-gay attitudes. Saying, “I understand how talking about these issues can be stressful,” is different from, “I understand why you're opposed to this issue.” The former lets someone know that you understand how difficult these discussions can be. The latter can be interpreted as affirming the person's harmful attitudes.

People don't empathize with abstract discussions about equal rights. They empathize with specific injustices shown to hurt real people.

a gay person's shoes, ask them how they would feel if they faced some of the specific injustices that gay people face (e.g., “Imagine you were told you couldn't take time off when your loved one got sick or hurt. How would you feel? That's what it feels like for gay people”). Focus on sharing emotionally compelling stories, and always connect those stories back to the issues you're discussing and the ways that people can help end the injustice.

Don't get distracted by anti-gay rhetoric. Don't debate anti-gay activists; their intolerance is deeply ingrained and trying to change their minds isn't productive. Instead, focus on persuading everyday Americans. The public is tiring of anti-gay opponents' angry, confrontational approach. Focus on remaining reasonable and relatable, even when dealing with shrill and excitable anti-gay opponents. Talk about all the important reasons to support gay people; don't get dragged down by those who want to manufacture and then debate their reasons not to.

Be careful about using highly charged language. Research shows that using terms like “bigotry,” “prejudice,” and “hatred” to describe anti-gay attitudes is viewed by many Americans as shrill and confrontational. Attacking anti-gay activists doesn't give Americans a reason to support equality for LGBT people. Instead, talk about why gay and transgender people should have the same chance as everyone else to earn a living, be safe in their communities, serve their country, and take care of the ones they love.

Meet people where they're at. Despite the fact that many Americans are still ambivalent about issues like marriage, people have made significant strides in terms of understanding LGBT people and issues.

However, expecting Americans to cover that remaining distance on their own won't work. Help take responsibility for closing the distance. Acknowledge the journey people took to get to where they are—and the progress they've already made. Showing respect for another person's journey encourages them to continue further down that road.

Promote inclusion, avoid confusion. Long, complex descriptions and acronyms can pull audiences out of an emotional relationship with the issues and make them feel like the person talking to them speaks an entirely different language. When talking to people who are new to these issues, keep descriptions simple (e.g., "gay couples" or "gay and transgender people"). Gradually expand their awareness and understanding. And just as important: Be purposefully inclusive as you share diverse stories and voices—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and straight—that can connect people to the common ground we share.

Don't invalidate your audience's feelings. The discomfort many people feel in talking about gay issues is real. Saying, "You shouldn't feel that way," is very likely to alienate them. Acknowledging how a person feels (e.g., "I understand how this can be difficult to talk about") can create a bridge and earn their trust.

Things to Avoid

1) DON'T repeat or acknowledge anti-gay messages. Don't say things like "Gay couples aren't destroying marriage" or "This isn't about defending marriage." While it's tempting to argue against the false claims of anti-gay activists, repeating their language and soundbites just makes their concepts "stick" in people's minds. If repeating anti-gay language is unavoidable, think about using the "so-called" qualifier to remind audiences that opponents' terminology is misleading (e.g., "This so-called Defense of Marriage Act is really about hurting committed couples").

2) DON'T focus on differences in religious beliefs. Theological arguments with those who aren't comfortable with gay people are rarely effective. Research indicates that many religious people who change their minds on LGBT issues do so after forming an emotional connection with a gay person, which makes them willing to look at their faith a little differently. Rather than arguing over different interpretations of theology, talk about shared values and beliefs, tell personal stories, and help people understand the common ground we share.

Glossary

LGBT PEOPLE AND ISSUES

- **gay people** (not "homosexuals," an offensive, outdated clinical term)
- **lesbian, lesbians**
- **lesbian and gay people**
- **gay and transgender people**
- **gay couples** or **gay and lesbian couples** (not "homosexual couples" or "same-sex couples")
- **bi** (consider using when referring to bisexual people and relationships in general contexts)
- **orientation (sexual orientation)** on first reference if necessary; never "sexual preference" or "gay lifestyle" – two inaccurate, offensive terms)
- **gender identity, gender expression**
- **advocates for gay equality, advocates for gay and transgender equality** (not "gay activists")

COMMON GROUND VOCABULARY

- **care, caring**
- **commitment**
- **responsibility**
- **security**
- **duty, service, sacrifice, patriotic**
- **loyalty, trust**
- **family**
- **friendship**
- **community, neighbor**
- **together**
- **hard-working**

3) DON'T compare—directly or indirectly—the experiences of gay and transgender people with those of African Americans. Likewise, don't make comparisons to the African American Civil Rights Movement.

Research is clear: these comparisons alienate African Americans, and they don't actually help people understand the concrete, specific harms that LGBT people face.

4) DON'T use the language of conflict. Most Americans don't typically respond well to framing LGBT issues as a "war," "battle," or "fight." Avoid war metaphors and language. Instead, talk about the harms and injustices that LGBT people experience on a daily basis.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is one in a series of documents on effectively talking about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues, including: Overall Approaches, Marriage & Relationship Recognition, Inclusive Employment Protections, Inclusive Hate Crimes Laws, Adoption & Gay Parents, and Ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell. For additional information, please email talkingaboutseries@glaad.org. © 2009 Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and Movement Advancement Project.