

LGBT People in Medicine

Understanding Heterosexism

– breaking down misconceptions –

So you've finished taking the Heterosexist Challenge and want to learn what makes those 10 statements Heterosexist? No matter what your score was, we guarantee you might learn something new by reading these explanations!



1. DO YOU assume that everyone you meet is heterosexual?

One of the defining features of Heterosexism is the personal assumption that everyone in the world is or should be heterosexual. As you meet more patients from different walks of life, the unbelievable diversity in the world will surprise you. The LGBT community (approximately 10% of the population according to Kinsey et. al.) is testimony to the fact assuming everyone is heterosexual can make one seem insensitive, or worse, ignorant. Assuming everyone is heterosexual is akin to assuming all your patients are Christian, when some of your patients may be Buddhist or Muslim. As physicians, we can offer the best health care when patients feel they can trust us to accept them without judgment.

2. DO YOU try to guess which is the "man" or "woman" in a same-sex couple?

Many people who are not Homophobic still believe in the stereotype that in same-sex couples, one partner is the "man" and the other partner is the "woman." This is Heterosexist because it assumes that ALL relationships must have a "man" and a "woman," even if the two individuals are really the same sex. That said, same-sex couples where one partner is more masculine or fulfills a traditionally masculine role and the other is more feminine or fulfills a traditionally feminine role do exist. Although they do exist, by no means do they make up the majority of relationships in the LGBT community. What makes this statement Heterosexist is the belief that there MUST be a "man" and a "woman" in every relationship.

3. DO YOU look at an LGBT person and automatically think of his or her sexuality rather than seeing him as a whole, complex person?

This assumption is very common and often cannot be helped by even the most well meaning person. When most people find out someone is gay or lesbian, their immediate reaction is to picture the person in bed with someone of the same-sex, rather than see them as a whole, complex person. This immediate reaction is Heterosexist because it assumes that only straight people are complex people that are not defined by what they do in bed. Although this is understandable because having sex with someone of the same-sex is part of what it means to be LGBT, it is by no means the ONLY defining factor that makes someone LGBT. Being lesbian, gay or bisexual is defined by an individual's SEXUAL ORIENTATION and is not limited to just their sexual behavior. Rather than immediately picturing someone in bed, remember that the person has other identifying features – their hair color, their sports interests, their political values – which makes up their complex

personality. If you must picture them intimately, try picturing them snuggling in the back of a movie theatre with their same-sex date or eating a romantic candle-lit dinner with their boy/girlfriend.

4. DO YOU fail to confront a homophobic remark for fear of being identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender?

Heterosexist remarks are often times only confronted by people who themselves are NOT Heterosexist. People who have lost all Heterosexist assumptions often believe that it does not matter if people wrongly assume they are LGBT because they think sexual orientation should be a non-issue when it comes to how you treat a person. These individuals confront Homophobic remarks without fear of being identified as LGBT. It is this fear that keeps most non-homophobic people from confronting such remarks, which hurt LGBT people and maintain Homophobia in society.

5. DO YOU think that if a LGBT person touches you he or she is making sexual advances?

Heterosexism often includes the assumption that an LGBT person is automatically attracted to ANY person of the same-sex. Again, although being attracted to persons of the same-sex is one of many ways to describe being LGBT, LGBT people have discriminating taste just like everyone else in society. Believe it or not, there is just as much diversity in the LGBT community as there is in society at large. For better or for worse, there are ethnic preferences, hairy/smooth preferences and even socioeconomic class preferences within the LGBT community – just like everyone else.

“At first I was shocked when my best friend told me he was gay. Then I was afraid that he would come on to me. When he told me he wasn’t interested, I paused again. Why not??”

– Medical Student at Temple University SOM

6. DO YOU think you can “spot one”?

One of the defining features of Heterosexism is the assumptions that non-straight people somehow ARE different and therefore can be spotted out of a crowd. Although in a millennium where LGBT culture has become more commercial and many LGBT identified people dress or act similarly, you will be surprised that many LGBT people act or dress “straight” because that is how they feel most comfortable and they do not want their superficial appearance to define their sexual orientation. Likewise, there are many straight folk that have been mistakenly assumed to be gay or lesbian because of the way they dress or act and, in the worst cases, have been victims of violent LGBT Hate Crimes. In this way Heterosexism is not only harmful to LGBT people, but also straight people who are wrongly labeled as LGBT.

7. DO YOU think that LGBT people are too outspoken when they ask for LGBT rights?

This belief is Heterosexist because it assumes that LGBT people are asking for SPECIAL rights, when actually LGBT rights are simply asking for EQUAL rights – rights given to all heterosexual citizens, but not extended to LGBT citizens. In

medicine, partner visitation and decision making rights are a classic example, especially in the ER. Lifelong partners are often kept from seeing their spouse in their last moments of life because they are not legally recognized as an "immediate family" member. LGBT rights laws are passed not to give "special rights" to LGBT people, but rather to ensure LGBT rights are respected EQUALLY. Alternatively, laws that punish LGBT Hate Crimes are passed not to overly punish crimes against LGBT people, but rather to ensure violent crimes motivated by anti-LGBT hate are punished EQUALLY, in order to send a message to offenders that these hate motivated crimes are not tolerated by our society.

8. DO YOU feel that a gay or lesbian person is just a man or woman who couldn't find a mate of the opposite sex?

Heterosexism assumes that everyone desires to find a mate of the opposite sex because it presumes that everyone is straight. When challenged with the possibility that someone desires a mate of the SAME sex, Heterosexism concludes that the individual must not have been able to find his or her "proper" mate, someone of the OPPOSITE sex. By assuming that everyone is straight, this form of Heterosexism ignores the diversity of our society and fails to accept people who are different from the majority.

9. DO YOU use the term "gay" or "lesbian" as an accusation?

When statements such as "that's so gay" or "you're a lesbo" are used to accuse someone of doing something wrong, they reflect the Heterosexist belief that being gay or lesbian is "wrong" because it is different than being straight. Although usually not directed at an LGBT person, these statements make derogatory remarks about LGBT people socially acceptable. They also reinforce Homophobia in society, though it may not have been the person's intention to do so. Feel free to describe things as "gay" or "lesbian," but be conscious not to use these words in a way that implies being LGBT is not right.

10. DO YOU (or would you) avoid mentioning to friends that you are involved with a LGBT student organization because you are afraid they will think you are gay?

People who have lost all Heterosexist assumptions often times believe it does not matter if people wrongly assume THEY are LGBT for two reasons. Firstly, these Allies believe being LGBT is normative and if someone assumes they are LGBT, it's OK because it will not change anything. Secondly, these Allies also believe that sexual orientation is a personal quality that other people should not make into an issue. If by wrongly assuming they are LGBT changes the way someone would treat them, these Allies would be just as upset as an LGBT person – not because they desire to be treated as a straight person, but because they would want to be treated equally if they WERE LGBT.

Brought to you by AMSA and LGBT People in Medicine

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