



Education Department Resource

What Do We Really Think?

A Group Exercise to Increase Heterosexual Ally Behavior

Contributed by Tanya Smolinsky and the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley

Time: 20 minutes
Grouping: Individual, whole group
Audience: All (educators, students, families, etc.)
Materials: *What Do We Think?* Surveys, pencils/pens, background readings on social norms and heterosexual allies (optional)

Purpose

- To provide people with accurate information about their peers' attitudes towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people
- To empower people to act as allies towards LGBT people by correcting misperceptions.
- To encourage people to see themselves as allies
- To reduce people's shame and guilt about not speaking up as an ally for fear of social ostracism and/or being perceived as LGBT themselves

Description

Hand out the survey entitled "What Do We Really Think?" Depending upon your audience, define the word "peer" in the questionnaire as meaning classmate, colleague, or friend. Ask audience members to fill out the survey completely and anonymously because you will be collecting them. Once you have collected them, shuffle them thoroughly and redistribute them to your audience. Ask that people participate according to the survey they have in their hands, not their own responses. Instruct participants to stand if the surveys in their hands indicate that the typical peer agrees or strongly agrees with the statement, "Being LGBT is healthy and normal"—that is either number 4 or 5 is circled for 1a. Have everyone look around before sitting down. Next ask people to stand if the survey in their hand indicates that the individual (who filled it out) agrees or strongly agrees with the statement, "Being LGBT is healthy and normal"—that is either number 4 or 5 is circled for 1b. Again have everyone look around before sitting down. Repeat this process for statements 2 and 3. Once you have had your audience members stand for each of the statements, discuss the questions below.

Discussion

- What did you observe during this exercise? (*Answer: People think that their peers are less accepting of LGBT people than they actually are.*)
- How do you think that this misperception affects people's behavior? (*Answer: People are less likely to behave as an ally and more likely to internalize heterosexist attitudes.*)
- Now that you have more accurate information about your peers' attitudes toward LGBT people, how might this affect your behavior? (*Answer: I will behave as an ally.*)

What Do We Think?

For each of the statements below, circle the numbers that most closely correspond with both your own belief and the belief you feel is typically held by members of your peer group.

1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=unsure; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree

1. Being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) is healthy and normal.

- | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Your peers' typical response | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. Your response | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

2. I would be accepting towards a close friend or family member who is LGBT.

- | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Your peers' typical response | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. Your response | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

3. LGBT people should have the same rights as straight people.

- | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Your peers' typical response | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. Your response | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

What Do We Think?

For each of the statements below, circle the numbers that most closely correspond with both your own belief and the belief you feel is typically held by members of your peer group.

1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=unsure; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree

1. Being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) is healthy and normal.

- | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Your peers' typical response | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. Your response | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

2. I would be accepting towards a close friend or family member who is LGBT.

- | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Your peers' typical response | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. Your response | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

3. LGBT people should have the same rights as straight people.

- | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Your peers' typical response | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. Your response | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Social Norms Theory: Definition and Assumptions¹

Definition

Social norms are people's beliefs about the attitudes and behaviors that are normal, acceptable, or even expected in a particular social context. In many situations, people's perceptions of these norms will greatly influence their behavior. When people misperceive the norms of their peer group—that is when they inaccurately think an attitude or behavior is more (or less) common than is actually the case—they may choose to engage in behaviors that are in sync with those false norms.²

With regard to LGBT people, most people misperceive their peers' attitudes—that is they think that their peers are less accepting of LGBT people than they actually are. This misperception leads many people to avoid behaving as an ally to LGBT people when they might act otherwise if they had the correct perception of their peers' attitudes. In some cases, these misperceived attitudes might even lead individuals to internalize prejudices against LGBT people and/or behave in discriminatory ways that they perceive as the norm.

Pluralistic Ignorance is the term that is used in academia to discuss Social Norms Theory and refers to the incorrect belief that one's private attitudes, judgments or behavior are different from others. In a study of 240 undergraduate dormitory residents, researchers found that students' personal attitudes toward LGB people were significantly more positive than the attitudes they perceived their friends and typical students to hold, and that increased exposure to LGB students did not moderate this perception.³ "If the students' perceptions of peers' and friends' negative attitudes persist," conclude the researchers, "regardless of level of interpersonal contact, cognitive dissonance theory would predict that they might change their behavior to be consistent with their beliefs, thus exacerbating the often hostile climate for LGB students.

¹ From Social Norms and Social Marketing, Higher Education Center at www.edc.org/hec/socialnorms/

² Social Norms Theory: Definitions and Assumptions was developed by Alan David Berkowitz, Ph. D. For more information on applications of Social Norms Theory to health and social issues see: Berkowitz, A.D., From Reactive to Proactive Prevention: Promoting an Ecology of Health on Campus, in P.C. Rivers and E.R. Shore (eds.), Substance Abuse on Campus: A Handbook for College and University Personnel, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT (1997) and Berkowitz, A.D., Applications of Social Norms Theory to Other Health and Social Justice Issues (available from the author at <http://myweb.fltg.net/users/alan/socialnorms.html>). Alan David Berkowitz is an independent consultant who helps colleges, universities, health departments and community organizations design programs that address health and social justice issues.

³ Anne M. Bowen & Martin J. Bourgeois, Attitudes Toward Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Students: The Contribution of Pluralistic Ignorance, Dynamic Social Impact, and Contact Theories, **Journal of American College Health**, 50, 91-96 (2001).

Assumptions

1. One's actions are often based on misinformation about, or misperceptions of one's environment.
2. For a norm to be perpetuated, it is not necessary for the majority to believe it, but only for the majority to believe that the majority believes it.
3. Whether or not one's perceptions are based in reality, they result in real consequences for others.
4. Individuals often exhibit bystander behavior by passively accepting (mis)perceptions and perpetuating the status quo rather than actively intervening to change it. Therefore, many heterosexuals who might want to speak out stay in the "ally closet."
5. Even when individuals do not personally engage in problematic behavior, they may contribute to the climate of pluralistic ignorance by the way they talk about the behavior. In this way, they can be the "carriers" of misinformation. Pluralistic Ignorance thus serves to strengthen beliefs and values that the "carriers" do not themselves hold.
6. Pluralistic Ignorance is self-perpetuating because it discourages the expression of opinions and actions that one falsely believes are non-conforming.
7. Appropriate information, carefully targeted, can help shift people from a bystander or "closeted" position to an interventionist one.
8. An individual's culture and community, and the meaning of information within that culture, must be considered when designing an intervention.
9. Pluralistic Ignorance accompanies periods of social change, when attitudes change faster than social norms.
10. Pluralistic Ignorance is intensified during times of personal change.
11. Pluralistic Ignorance exists in relation to health behaviors (e.g. alcohol and drug use, smoking, sexual activity, eating disorders, etc.) and attitudes about others (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.).

Becoming a Heterosexual Ally

Heterosexual Ally Developmental Model⁴

Stage I. Innocence

Typically until approximately the age of four, prior to any social consciousness, individuals have no assumptions about sexual or gender appropriate behaviors.

Stage II. Ignorance

Misinformation about LGBT people is learned from family members, peers, faith communities, schools, the media, etc. and is accepted without question.

Stage III. Resistance

Individuals become aware of the oppression of LGBT people. Feelings of guilt, shame and anger often accompany this awareness. These feelings may lead some individuals to become overwhelmed and to shut down. Others may feel motivated to actively confront societal oppression.

Stage IV. Redefinition

Individuals become aware of their privilege as heterosexuals. They band together with other people to end anti-LGBT oppression and come to understand how heterosexism is related to other forms of societal oppression, such as sexism.

Stage V. Internalization

Individuals identify as heterosexual allies. This identity becomes an integrated part of the self, co-existing without tension among a variety of other identities.

Four Strategies to Increase Ally Behavior and Reduce Homophobia and Heterosexism⁵

1. Reduce the shame and guilt that keep people “stuck” and unable to act effectively as allies. (Remind people that while we are all responsible for eradicating heterosexism, none of us are to blame for its existence and none of us are immune from its consequences).
2. Increase people’s awareness of how heterosexism and homophobia manifest so that they understand how to combat these forces.
3. Correct people’s misperception that their peers’ are less accepting of LGBT people and more homophobic than they actually are.
4. Create opportunities for people—particularly allies—to join together in coalition with others who want to reduce heterosexism and homophobia.

⁴ Adapted from Jackson/Hardiman’s Model of Dominant Identity Development

⁵ These four strategies were informed by Social Norms Theory and the Heterosexual Ally Development Model and are incorporated into the sensitivity training curriculum that was developed by the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley, Rochester, New York (585-244-8640).