# TALKING ABOUT

## Overall Approaches for LGBT Equality

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## 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 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues, we recommend grounding your discussions in the following statement of common purpose:

> **This is about everyday Americans who want the same chance as everyone else to pursue health and happiness, 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 this statement. 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 LGBT issues are rooted in the common ground we share—when we emphasize the values, hopes and beliefs we have in common, instead of 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 or ignore the harms and daily injustices that LGBT people face.

## EMPHASIZE COMMON GROUND

Some Americans aren't sure whether to support equality for LGBT people because they erroneously believe that gay people are very different from straight people. However, despite media stereotypes, LGBT 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, hopes and beliefs.** Family. Hard work. Responsibility. Commitment. Sacrifice. Duty. These are a few of the common values shared by LGBT people and straight Americans alike. Talking 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 the pursuit of equality is also about removing unfair barriers that prevent LGBT people from fulfilling 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 laws or 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 recognize LGBT people as part of the American fold.

## ILLUSTRATE CONCRETE HARMS

Most Americans simply don't understand the inequalities LGBT people face on a daily basis. For example, many Americans mistakenly believe that gay couples wouldn't need to get married if they'd just get a power of attorney. Recent polling shows that nine out of 10 Americans don't realize that hardworking gay and transgender employees are still not protected by federal non-discrimination law—despite the fact that Gallup polling shows 89% of Americans support employment protections for gay people. They don't realize that LGBT people are targeted

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| "This is about everyday Americans who want the same chance as everyone else to pursue health and happiness, earn a living, be safe in their communities, serve their country, and take care of the ones they love." | | |
| **1. Emphasize common ground** | • Use the language of common values, hopes and beliefs.<br>• Make it about people and their stories, not laws or policies.<br>• Remind people that LGBT people are everyday Americans who live ordinary lives—neighbors, coworkers and friends who also provide for their families, walk the dog, mow the lawn, etc. | |
| **2. Illustrate concrete harms** | • Avoid abstract "rights" and "discrimination" language.<br>• Make it clear that existing laws don't protect LGBT people.<br>• Focus on a few meaningful injustices and illustrate them with emotionally compelling stories. | |

for violence simply because of who they are. Before more Americans support equality for LGBT people, they need to understand the extent of the inequalities they face.

**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 inequalities in vivid, compelling ways.

**Make it clear when and how existing laws don't cover LGBT people.** Don't assume that people understand the issues; it's very likely they don't. Be specific in clarifying the problem. For example, it's legal in 29 states to fire employees just because they're gay, and in 35 states because they're transgender. It's also legal in these states to deny housing to gay and transgender people. Banning gay couples from marriage means they can't pass their Social Security benefits or pensions on to each other in old age, or take personal leave if their partner becomes ill. Banning adoption by lesbian and gay parents hurts not only their own children, but also those in foster and government care waiting for a loving, forever home.

**Focus on a few meaningful injustices and illustrate them with emotionally compelling stories.** Focus on vivid stories of injustices that all Americans can relate to and empathize with. For example, rather than talking generically about employment discrimination, help people understand what it's like to live each day with the fear of being fired because you're gay or transgender. For marriage, talk about being barred from end-of-life decision making for a partner of more than 50 years, rather than about "rights" or "benefits". 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. But there's an easy way around this. People don't have to imagine they're gay to be able to imagine how certain situations make gay people feel. So, instead of asking a straight person to put themselves in a gay person's shoes, ask them how *they* would feel if they faced some of the specific injustices that LGBT people face (e.g., "Imagine you were told you couldn't take time off if the person you love got sick or hurt. How would you feel? That's what it feels like for gay couples when they're banned from being able to marry"). 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 injustices.

**Don't get distracted by anti-gay rhetoric.** Don't debate anti-LGBT 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, judgmental, confrontational approach. Focus on remaining reasonable and relatable, even when dealing with mean-spirited anti-gay opponents. Talk about all the important reasons to support LGBT people; don't get dragged down by those who want to manufacture and then endlessly debate a host of false reasons not to.

**Focus on common values, not differences in religious beliefs.** Getting into theological arguments with those who aren't comfortable with LGBT people is rarely effective. Research indicates that many religious people who change their minds on LGBT issues do so after forming an emotional connection with an LGBT person, which allows them 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.

**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 recognize 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 abbreviations can pull audiences out of an emotional relationship with the issues, make them feel overwhelmed, and/or make them feel like the person talking to them speaks an entirely different language. When talking to people who are new to these issues or not yet supportive, keep descriptions simple (for example, "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 LGBT issues is real. Saying, "You shouldn't feel that way," is likely to alienate them. Acknowledging how a person feels (for example, "I understand how this can be hard to talk about, but I'm sure we can agree that nobody should have to live in fear that they can be unfairly fired from their job just because they're transgender") can create a bridge and earn their trust.

# THINGS TO AVOID

**1) DON'T repeat or acknowledge anti-LGBT messages.** For example, when opponents claim that gay people are trying to "destroy marriage," don't respond by saying, "Gay couples aren't destroying marriage." While it's tempting to argue against the false claims of anti-gay activists, repeating their language and soundbites (even to dispute them) 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 false and misleading (e.g., "This so-called Defense of Marriage Act is really about hurting loving, committed couples").

**2) DON'T use highly charged language.** Research shows that using terms like "bigotry," "prejudice" and "hatred" to describe anti-LGBT attitudes is viewed by many Americans as shrill, confrontational name-calling. Attacking anti-LGBT activists doesn't give Americans a reason to support equality for LGBT people; rather, it can make them want to back away from the person or group doing the name-calling. Instead, use language that is measured and relatable to create empathy and a sense of how opponents' attitudes and actions hurt LGBT people.

**3) DON'T inadvertently validate anti-LGBT attitudes.** Saying "I understand how talking about these issues can be challenging"—which lets someone know that you understand how difficult these discussions can sometimes be—is different from saying "I understand why you're opposed to this issue." Acknowledge the discomfort, not the person's hurtful attitudes.

**4) DON'T compare—directly or indirectly—the experiences of gay and transgender people with those of African Americans, Latinos or the immigrant rights movement.** Likewise, don't make comparisons to the African American Civil Rights Movement. Research is clear: such comparisons alienate these audiences, and they don't actually help people understand the harms and injustices that LGBT people face.

**5) 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 similar language. Instead, talk about the injustices that LGBT people experience on a daily basis, and the importance of ensuring that all people—including LGBT people—are treated fairly and equally.

## Terminology: Talking About LGBT Issues

Below are a few terms to use when talking about LGBT issues. Please see *An Ally's Guide to Terminology: Talking About LGBT People & Equality* for an in-depth discussion of related language (www.lgbtmap.org/terminologyguide).

- **gay (adj.), gay people, lesbian, lesbians** (not "homosexuals," an offensive, outdated clinical term); **bi** (consider using when referring to bisexual people and relationships in general contexts)

- **transgender (adj.), transgender people** (not "transgenders" or "transgendered people")

- **gay and transgender people** (*lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender*, if needed for clarity; use *LGBT* when talking with supportive audiences who are familiar with the issues)

- **gay couples, gay and lesbian couples** (not "homosexual couples" or "same-sex couples")

- **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 Conversations

Focus on shared values like caring, commitment, family, responsibility, hard work and community when talking about LGBT issues. For example:

- *All hardworking people in our city, including gay and transgender people, should have the chance to earn a living and provide for themselves and their families.*

- *Marriage is about love, commitment, responsibility, and a lifelong promise two people make to take care of each other and be there for each other, always.*

- *Open military service is about serving one's country with honor and integrity.*