

How to be an Effective Ally

QUEER VOICES OF BHUTAN



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WHAT IS AN ALLY?



An *ally*, from a Latin verb meaning “to bind to,” is used to describe “someone who supports disenfranchised and underrepresented groups of people within our own country, such as minorities and those in the LBGTQIA+ community.”

Anyone, regardless of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, can support LBGTQIA+ community. Deepening your understanding of LBGTQIA+ - related issues, including basic terms and concepts, can help you on your journey as an ally.

An ally is not just limited to an individual; it can be a group, an institution or any cohort who support and advocate for inclusion and change.

What Does “Ally” Mean?

- A person who has a genuine, strong concern for the well-being of LBGTQIA+ people, supports and accepts them, and advocates for equal rights and fair treatment.



- A person who confronts challenges that LGBTQIA+ people experience, and believes that we face these problems in society:
 - Heterosexism - The assumption that everyone is or should be straight.
 - Biprejudice - Harmful, preconceived ideas about bisexual people.
 - Transprejudice - Harmful, preconceived ideas about transgender people.
 - Heterosexual Privilege - The everyday privileges straight people have in society. For example, the ability to display attraction or affection (e.g., holding hands) to the opposite gender in public without fear of judgment or even violence.

“I believe that every human deserves to live a happy life no matter who they chose to love. Unless you bring chaos and adversity to society, you can do anything you love, and you must do it. The LGBTIQ community deserves equal rights and respect as everyone.”

Kencho Pema Wangden, 22.

Ways to be an Ally:

- **Stay Informed:** Educate yourself. Ask questions, do research, and don't be afraid to be honest about what you don't know.
- **Speak Up:** There are many reasons people don't speak up when they hear something offensive, like "that's so gay." It can be awkward, people don't know what to say, or don't want to make the situation worse. But when you speak up, it educates others, lets them know their words are not acceptable, and may give others the courage to speak up as well. You can also change how people act in the future. This is powerful.
- **Be Honest:** Speak openly about family members, friends, and colleagues who are LGBTQIA+, if they are out and are comfortable with you discussing it with others. People often assume they will offend others or make them uncomfortable if they mention LGBTQIA+ topics. Also, remember that occasional disagreement is normal and healthy!
- **Support Equality:** Support policies at school, work, or other places that help protect LGBTQIA+ people from discrimination. Even if the issues seem small, they can have a big impact on people's lives. If you see or hear of an unfair rule or policy, talk to a peer or trusted adult about your concerns and what you can do to make a change.

- **Come Out as an Ally:** Anyone can be an ally, regardless of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Be proud to support the LGBTQIA+ community. Remember, being an ally can be joining a support group or as simple as showing your support online. Allies are important and we welcome supporters of the LGBTQIA+ community. They can be effective and powerful voices for LGBTQIA+ equality, and can not only help LGBTQIA+ people feel comfortable coming out, but also help others understand the importance of equality and fairness for all people.



WHY ALLIES ARE NECESSARY

Allies recognize that though they're not a member of the underinvested and oppressed communities they support, they can make a concerted effort to better understand the struggles.

Because an ally might have more privilege and recognizes said privilege, they are powerful voices alongside oppressed ones.



THE WORK OF ALLYSHIP

Being an ally is hard work.

“An ally is someone who shows up, speaks up, and is there for the queer community all the time. As an ally who is also a journalist and a producer, I personally believe it is my responsibility to share LGBTQ stories that are life-affirming and dignified.”

Namgay Zam, 35

Many would-be allies fear making mistakes that could have them labelled as “-ist” or “-ic” (racist, sexist, transphobic, homophobic, etc). As an ally, you’re also affected by a system of oppression. As an ally, there is much to unlearn and learn; mistakes are expected. As an ally, you need to own your mistakes and be proactive in your education, every day.



“Having worked with the LGBT community, it further deepened my understanding that they are as normal as any one of us and any discrimination against them is something I deeply feel for. My everyday calling is to help in whatever way I can. It truly gives me immense pleasure to be able to play my part.”

Sangay Wangmo Yangden



Why do we need allies?



The support of heterosexual and/or cisgender allies is very important when speaking out with and for members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Allies use their position in society to counter discrimination of marginalised groups. (Note: Someone is cisgender when their sense of gender identity corresponds to their sex assigned at birth). Together, we can make our world a safer and more affirming place for everyone.

“Why shouldn’t the LGBTIQ folks get equal rights? We all are humans. And as a Buddhist, no Buddhist text says that humans shouldn’t be LGBTQ+ to attain enlightenment. I am pro-rights for all.”

Tandin Phurba, 20



Here are a few basic principles to keep in mind:



- Language is powerful. Use gender neutral language when referring to groups or people you don't know – replace 'she/he' with 'they', and use the term 'partner'. Wait for someone to mention their pronouns, or if it feels right, ask politely about their pronoun, e.g. 'What pronoun suits you best?'
- Don't make assumptions about someone's gender, sex or sexuality or assume that everyone is heterosexual or fits into a single idea of gender roles.
- Understand that people don't have to come out. They don't owe this to anyone, and some will prefer not to come out. Also, it's up to them to share their personal stories when and to whom it feels right.
- Understand that gender identity (how you personally experience your own gender) and sexuality (sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions, and behaviours) can be complex, more than just gay or straight.
- Be aware of normative bias and don't ask questions you wouldn't ask a straight, cis person, e.g. 'When did you decide you were heterosexual?!' Similarly, don't ask invasive questions about sexual behaviours, family formation, conception, etc you'd never dream of asking a straight person.

- While we may refer to LGBTQIA+ as a ‘community’, it doesn’t mean we all share the same experiences and values. We’re still also individuals. We should take the time to learn from people with different experiences of this broad and diverse group.



Listening is key

As allies, one of the most powerful things we can do is listen to and affirm LGBTQIA+ voices.

“I first met a transgender woman and through her, met others from the community. Over the years, they all became very special to me. I support them by listening to them as much as I can. As an ally, my first duty is to accept them with an open heart and in turn, help them accept themselves.”

Bunu, 36

Don't feel intimidated or scared to be an ally! We all make mistakes. If someone corrects you, be sure to listen, acknowledge and learn from the experience. Then move the conversation forward. Check your own insecurity: don't take offence and don't make it about you.

- Always try to be respectful.
- Be open-minded and trust in people's experiences when they are sharing about their lives. Be willing to learn from them and think about how you might be able to take actions, big or small, to adjust your own behaviours and help create a more inclusive and affirming environment.

- Ask people how they are and be willing to listen. Be aware they may have experienced things you haven't and could never really understand. Be willing to offer support when you can.
- Be aware that when LGBTQIA+ issues are current social 'hot' topics this can have very negative impacts on individuals. Reach out, and try not to get caught up in confrontations. Focus on inclusion and kindness.



Stand up and be Proud

Be proud to be an ally. Something as simple as wearing a rainbow lanyard can make such a difference in helping people feel comfortable, included and affirmed.

- Be sure to stand up and out against discrimination. If you hear negative or uninformed comments about the LGBTQIA+ community, explain why it's offensive or wrong. You could share something you've read, seen or heard that has helped you understand gender diversity more broadly.
- Call out harmful stereotyping: explain that this contributes to creating an environment in which LGBTQIA+ people feel unsafe to be out or visible.



WHAT TO DO IF SOMEONE COMES OUT TO YOU...

'Coming out of the closet' is the process by which someone:

1. Accepts and identifies with their gender identity and/or sexual and romantic orientation; and
2. Shares their identity willingly with others.

Sometimes we talk about coming out as if it were a one time thing. But for most folks coming out is a series of decisions - sometimes daily - that LGBTQ+ people navigate in every new setting they enter.

People may be 'OUT' in some spaces, and 'IN' in others.

OUT or IN to Family, **OUT or IN** to Friends, **OUT or IN** to classmates/colleagues

OUT or IN to the neighbors.

A decision to come out to a person or group is one of **safety, comfort, trust & readiness.**

It's dangerous, unhealthy, and unhelpful to force someone to come out, or to "out" someone else (i.e., disclosing someone's gender identity or sexual orientation to others without the person's consent), regardless of your intentions (sometimes people think they are being helpful, or acting on the person's behalf to conquer their fears).

IF SOMEONE COMES OUT TO YOU...

DON'T:

1. Say "I always knew," or downplay the significance of their sharing with you.
2. Go tell everyone, bragging about your "new gay friend."
3. Forget that they are still the person you knew, befriended, or loved before.
4. Ask probing questions, or cross personal barriers you wouldn't have crossed earlier.
5. Assume you know why they came out to you.

DO:

1. Know that this is a sign of huge trust! (Yayy!)
2. Check-in on how confidential this is (Do other people know? Is this a secret?)
3. Remember that their gender/sexuality is just one dimension of them.
4. Show interest and curiosity about this part of them that they are sharing with you.
5. Ask them how you can best support them.

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