

FOURTH EDITION

the incredibly detailed honest forthright
fully comprehensive completely blunt
shockingly simple wonderfully helpful
and witty exposition on a topic that
sometimes makes people blanch but
really shouldn't because this compelling
open and straight to the point no pun
intended little publication will demystify
the secret world of gay people and be
your tried and trusted

guide to being a straight ally*

welcome to the fourth edition!

What a difference four revisions can make.

When the first edition of the *guide to being a straight ally* was released in 2007, the number of people who said that they knew someone who was lesbian, gay, or bisexual was a mere 4 in 10. In the workplace, many organizations were just starting to have conversations about the role of allies to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) community. And the thought of marriage equality was still aspirational.

Twelve years later, the world is a different place. Now, 8 in 10 people say they know someone who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual—and connections to people who are trans are constantly growing, with current estimates at around 37% of the U.S. population saying they personally know someone who is trans-identified. The engagement of allies at work has become the rule for organizations, not the exception. And in the United States, marriage equality is the law of the land. Notably, the win was marked by the support of allies who raised their voices alongside their gay and lesbian friends and family.

For [PFLAG National's Straight for Equality® program](#), the response from allies (and the LGBTQ+ people who love them) has been overwhelming. As of this writing, more than 150,000 copies of this book in its first two editions have been distributed in print, with thousands more downloaded. The series now includes three other books, including the *guide to being a trans ally*, which pushes those numbers above 200,000 copies. Over 17,000 people have participated in Straight for Equality learning sessions (of which there are now 16). And PFLAG chapters are engaging allies in their communities from coast to coast.

The fourth edition reflects much of the progress that has been made, and the evolving barriers that remain on the path to active allyship. We've learned a lot along the way from the allies who have welcomed us into their lives, and it is our great hope that the new content honors what they've shared and helps to engage more allies.

We continue to say that achieving equality and full inclusion will never be done alone. So, as always, we're thrilled that you're here.

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I remember being in school and learning about the civil rights and other social movements for equality and thinking to myself, ‘Well, if I had been old enough then, I would have stood up and done the right thing.’

And now I am. In spite of great progress like gay and lesbian people being able to marry, I still see inequality, and I know that I should do something. But it just isn’t that easy. I have so many questions. I don’t know everything. I’ve got some fears. And I’m just not sure where—if anywhere—I belong in the LGBTQ+ equality movement.

”

Katie, 29

Sound familiar? Feeling the same way?

You've come to the right place.

Welcome to Straight for Equality.

While some incredible progress has been made towards equality and fairness for people who are LGBTQ+, we're not there yet. Full equality can't happen without support from smart, energetic, compassionate, and dedicated allies. Basically, people just like you. (See? We just met and already have complete confidence in your abilities.)

Straight for Equality is a program developed by PFLAG National specifically created for people who want to stand up for LGBTQ+ equality but may not be sure how or even where they fit in. Straight for Equality invites, educates, and engages people who are not LGBTQ+ in supporting and advocating for LGBTQ+ equality in their homes, workplaces, and all of the communities where they live and belong.

Straight for Equality isn't about politics or politicians, Republicans or Democrats, radical activists or peacekeeping pacifists. While that may seem a little impossible, stick with us for a bit and see what it's about.

This project is about creating a place where all people who care about fairness can honestly and openly discuss and remove the barriers they face to becoming allies, get specific recommendations for action, and learn how to assist others—whether friends, family members, coworkers, or community members—in becoming agents of change.

For people who identify as LGBTQ+, the project provides a different way to think about connecting with allies, and offers resources that you can share to help them learn what allyship means. It also provides guidance on how you can support their ally journey. This book

specifically addresses issues related to sexual orientation, while the *guide to being a trans ally* focuses on gender identity and expression. Allyship can take different paths, so look for ways that you can support allies as well as how you might become a stronger ally to other people within the LGBTQ+ community.

Got questions?

We've got some answers. Through publications like this one, our website, social media, in-person learning sessions, or with suggested resources, we can help you find what you need.

Got concerns?

That's natural—and healthy! We'll do what we can to resolve your concerns and introduce you to people who had similar experiences and are willing to share their ally stories. Being an ally is not without its challenges. There are lots of issues and barriers that may keep people from getting involved, and that's why we're here. This book is just the first step.

Don't know how to get involved?

Keep reading. We're getting there. Pinky promise. Look for the invitations to action throughout this book for a few great ideas.

Already see yourself as an ally?

There's plenty of stuff inside for you, too. Look for ways to become more active and ideas for how you can engage and support new people on their ally journeys.

Allies (and potential allies), your time has come.

Equality guideposts

This book features a few nifty little icons to help you during your ally journey. Here's what they mean:



Stumbling Blocks

Caution with a twist. Read real-life stories from people about how they struggled to understand a situation, confronted a fear, or tried something new. These narratives are good reminders that you're not alone in your ally coming out process or in becoming a more active straight ally.



Phone-a-Friend

Get quick access to great resources that can help you get past your stumbling blocks and on the road, straight to equality. (Bad pun fully intended.)



Your Invitation

Learning more about how to be a powerful ally opens up a whole new set of opportunities for you to change your world. Take advantage of these invitations to try something new and help move equality forward.

Equality Literacy

While you're reading this book, it's possible that you'll find some words with which you're not familiar. Don't panic. Check out the *equality literacy* glossary starting on page 43 for help.

ally

noun | al · ly

Who are allies, anyway?

We've already mentioned them more than a dozen times, and the word seems simple to understand, right? Maybe. But chances are that if you ask a group of 10 people what "ally" means, you'll get 10 different answers. That's actually a good thing.

So before we get into what allies can do to create meaningful change for their LGBTQ+ friends, classmates, and colleagues, let's talk about what the word really entails.

In the beginning, there were lists.

As PFLAG National developed the Straight for Equality project in the time leading up to its 2007 launch, we started by researching how the word "ally" was being used within the LGBTQ+ equality movement. Certainly allies have always been here and doing important work, but we needed to explain who an ally is and the expectations around creating change. After all, what is the chance that someone would say they'd like to be an ally if they don't know what it is, or what's expected of them?

We went to work. We searched high and low for definitions of what allies are within the LGBTQ+ movement and what we found were *lists*.

There was the list of five things you must believe to be a good ally. The list of 25 things you must be doing to be a good ally. Even the list of 150 things that you need to believe and do before you earn the right to call yourself an ally. Even the explanations that were not list-based had some big requirements for people who wanted to adopt the term. Allies had to challenge homophobia and transphobia *every single time* they encountered it. Allies had to vote in a very specific way. Allies need to acknowledge and work to subvert their heterosexual privilege. Allies had to give money to LGBTQ+ organizations. Allies needed to only belong to faith communities that are openly supportive of people who are LGBTQ+.

These are some legitimately worthy goals, and are good options for *some* allies. But in the end, the same question kept coming up: aren't people worth so much more than being reduced to a list or a set of rigid demands—some of which would probably exclude many people from the effort?

We think so.

We went back to the drawing board and thought about what the path to being an ally really looks like. We thought how we might be able to expand it to bring more people on the journey. And leveraging the more than 45 years of experience that PFLAG has in helping people become accepting—and sometimes even advocates—we found ourselves looking at things differently. Our first step was to do a definition purge, and the second entailed drawing a picture.

Rather than developing a stiff set of requirements for someone to be an ally, we thought about the qualities people—regardless of where they are on their ally journey—possess:

- **Allies want to learn.** Allies are people who recognize they don't know all that can be known on LGBTQ+ issues or about all the experiences of people who are LGBTQ+, but they want to understand more.
- **Allies address their barriers.** They may have to grapple with some roadblocks to being openly and actively supportive of people who are LGBTQ+, and they're willing to take on the challenge.
- **Allies are people who know that support comes in many forms.** It can mean something super-public (think covering yourself in rainbow glitter and heading to a Pride celebration with a sign reading, "PROUD ALLY"). But it can also mean expressing support in more personal ways through the language we use, conversations we choose to have, and signals that we send. True allies know that all aspects of allyship are important, effective, and should be valued equally.
- **Allies are diverse.** Allies are people who know that there's no one way to be an ally, and that everyone gets to adopt the term in a different way...and that's ok.

**An admirable move. Great for Pride. But chances are it isn't practical for everyday kinds of stuff.*

As we started to think about the qualities of allies, the terms “journey” and “spectrum” kept coming up. The process of going from “not my issue” to “someone take me to my legislator to fix some laws!” rarely happens overnight. It usually entails a process of learning more, becoming comfortable enough to talk about the issue openly, knowing how to take on pushback, and eventually being able to help others in their ally journeys.

And that ally journey, as we looked at it, felt like its own coming out process of sorts. So we grabbed our sketchpads and went to work.

Behold, the Straight for Equality Ally Spectrum®:



Why is the ally spectrum useful?

First, it acknowledges that allies can be found across the spectrum of support, from the people who say, “Not my issue...but I’ll listen to you,” to those who feel comfortable finally saying “LGBTQ+” and talking about issues out loud, to those who get the LGB part, but want to understand the T, right through our super allies, who are off and trying to make lasting change.

Second, it is a reminder that no matter where people are on the spectrum, they are allies. No need to become an advanced ally before you claim the title. There are things to learn and things to do at every single point.

Finally, it gets rid of that icky feeling that we all get when we’re forced to ignore all of the characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences that make people who they are and try to squeeze them into a box to fit our own ideas about who they ought to be. Shake free the chains of being just a list or one definition, people! Now is your time to embrace your ally diversity. (Interested in more about the Ally Spectrum and things to do at different points on the journey? Keep reading, but also visit us online at straightforequality.org/allyspectrum.)

So why is this term so important? Why the “label”?

Even super-brainy people have taken on this issue. Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (ally status unknown) once wrote that, “Once you label me, you negate me,” suggesting that labeling any individual compromises their individuality.

We actually agree. Labels really aren’t for people at all.

But to us, identifying as an ally isn’t a label—it is a term of empowerment. It is a state of being, an explanation of who someone is, and where their values lie. It communicates key things that matter to them—LGBTQ+ equality, care for their LGBTQ+ friends, family, and colleagues—in a powerful way. It is a vocal and positive stand that clarifies an important point: While I may not be LGBTQ+, LGBTQ+ issues are my issues, too.

“You’re messing with my head!” you say. “Straight allies and allies with no specifics...why?”

There's a lot of conversation about it, and it tends to sound something like this: if the point is that your sexual orientation or gender identity/expression shouldn't matter, then why make such a point of mentioning it when we talk about being allies?

The short answer? Because it does matter.

Don't get us wrong—the goal is that one day none of this will be relevant. (At PFLAG, we joke that our job is to do such a good job at achieving equality and inclusion that we'll be able to put ourselves out of business.) But for now, it is relevant.

Consider this: As of this writing, roughly half of people who are LGBTQ+ are not out in their workplaces. About 50% of LGBTQ+ Americans say that they've experienced discrimination in their personal lives, in places like the workplace, housing, and education. Among LGBTQ+ youth in schools, nearly 60% say that they feel unsafe in their schools simply because of their sexual orientation, while almost 45% say they feel unsafe because of their gender expression.

In order to change these jarring statistics, we need to have a spectrum of diverse voices expressing their support for equality and inclusion—and that includes people who are *not* members of the LGBTQ+ community. They have a unique power to send the message that inclusion and equality aren't just things that people in the group affected want (in other words, LGBTQs), but something that everyone wants. And in order to make that unique, "It's not about me, but it really is about me" statement, talking about our background as someone who isn't LGBTQ+, but owns this issue is often necessary.

Where do we go from here?

By now, you've hopefully started taking a bit of an ally journey of your own. Maybe you're rethinking how you personally understand the term "ally." There's a chance that you considered where you might be on your ally spectrum right now and what it will take to move forward. Maybe you've even started thinking about what some of your barriers might be to becoming an out and proud straight ally.

If you've thought about these things—or thinking about them now—we're on the right track.

SIDENOTE

Ever wonder if your support as an ally matters to people who are LGBTQ+? We can tell you it does, but some of these narratives from LGBTQ+ people really help illustrate the tremendous power that your contributions have, even if you don't see them.

"My office had a Pride event last June, and the focus was on straight allies. Seeing so many people stepping up and saying that they are allies made me feel more secure and inspired me to come out. The best part? My boss was one of those proud straight allies! I never really thought I'd be out at work, but that was the signal that it could happen." —Roberto

"One of my favorite teachers at school has a safe space sticker at their desk and really tries to use inclusive language all the time. They even talked about gender-neutral pronouns in one class. Seeing the sticker and hearing those words made me comfortable talking about gender identity and even asking some questions of the teacher that I've never asked anyone before. I'm not sure how I identify quite yet, but having someone so open about how they're trying to understand what I'm going through really mattered to me." —Satabdi

"I'm very, very out. But even as a person who is incredibly open about talking about her sexual orientation, I still sometimes worry how someone might react when I come out to them. Recently, I was on a trip when the person next to me on a flight struck up a conversation. When he turned around to ask me about my background, he noticed my wedding ring, paused in a question that was going to be about what my husband does, and then asked me what my partner does. He said that he tries to assume nothing. That one word change made all of the difference for me. I knew I could be open, and the conversation was going to be comfortable. I really appreciated that." —Jane

"The support of allies has been crucial to my family. Just last week, my son was repeatedly teased about being a girl because of how he looks, and how other kids perceive him. He hates that. But this time, several girls in his class stood up for him and his right to wear what he wants. They know that boys can like pink. I think that these kids—these allies—are vital to making my son feel safe at school." —Marissa

“

I was telling a friend of mine about how my sister is getting married. She was excited and asked, ‘Her fiancé...what does he do?’

I didn’t want to make her feel put on the spot, so I smiled and said, ‘Not he —she’s marrying a chick!’

We’ve been friends for years, and I knew that making her laugh a little would be the right approach. I saw the look on her face as she processed what I said and realized that she’d just assumed my sister is straight.

She laughed and said, ‘So what does this chick do?’ Because I spoke up, she knew about my family, no one was uncomfortable, and I felt good about being honest and choosing to have the conversation with her. But it took me a while to get to the point of doing it. Being open took work to overcome some of my fears.”

Stephanie, 34

About those barriers...

As Bob Dylan wrote, the times, they are a-changin'. Just a look around our everyday lives and you can see more visibility, and, in many ways, acceptance, for people who are LGBTQ+. Count the number of shows that you watch that have LGBTQ+ characters or storylines. Watch the news and people are talking about the fact that people who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual now have the right to marry their same-sex partners. In schools, gay-straight alliances (or GSAs) are common, while workplaces feature employee groups for people who are LGBTQ+ and their allies.

So it should be easier than ever to be an ally, right?

Not always. In fact, sometimes the progress going on around us makes the stakes feel even higher for straight allies to speak up and become active. Progress around us doesn't always translate into feeling the confidence to initiate new conversations, deal with conflict, or even be an out ally. And sometimes even progress can feel like it makes people's deeply-held ideas become even stronger as they feel that their way of seeing things as being challenged. This sense of challenge often seems to make a big disagreement seem more likely, and the prospect of even starting a conversation tougher.

But remember where we talked about who allies are just a little while ago? (Like in that last chapter?) One of those big characteristics of allies is to identify *barriers* to being an ally and work through them. So let's talk a little bit about some of the most common barriers that allies often run into, shall we?



“You know...not that there’s anything wrong with that”

“I sometimes feel a little like a cliché these days. I’m one of those people who will tell you that I’ve got several gay friends, and even recently became friends with a man who is trans. And I take my responsibility to be an active ally who speaks up seriously. This sounds silly, but sometimes I get worried that when I do, people will think that I’m gay, too...you know, like that *Seinfeld* episode said, not that there’s anything wrong with that. I’m single, and I can see them jump to conclusions, and it isn’t comfortable for me because I’m an ally. But I don’t know how to address it, and it gets awkward, and I find that sometimes I end up not speaking at all.”

— Mark, 42

There’s a reason that more than 20 years after a *Seinfeld* episode in which the line, “I’m not gay...not that there’s anything wrong with that” was used it, is still relevant (and funny). The truth is that straight allies are rarely given instruction on how they “come out” as allies.

For some people, recognizing some of the negative treatment that people who are LGBTQ+ receive will make them nervous about speaking up. Discrimination is still real at work, in our communities and all around us. The need to minimize this fear by being able to self-identify as someone who is not LGBTQ+ may help them navigate this fear and be more outspoken.

For others, there’s a realization that their status as a person who is not LGBTQ+ is important because it sends a unique message about LGBTQ+ equality from someone who is not directly affected by progress made. The thought of not using that status as part of your super-change-making abilities can feel defeating. But still, people often don’t know how to state their ally status effectively.

And then, there are some that may be concerned about how speaking up may impact their dating prospects. (Just joking. Or not. Maybe sometimes?)

This isn’t a thing that is insurmountable—nor is it a barrier that makes someone a bad ally. Finding a comfort zone from which you can express your allyship is critical to being able to travel your ally journey. There’s no shame here.



Dear ally, meet PFLAG.

Straight for Equality is a program of PFLAG National. PFLAG, our “parent” organization (in more than one way) was founded in 1973 by Jeanne Manford in New York City. She and other parents—at a time when publicly supportive families of people who are gay and lesbian were rare—started a group which has come to be known as the country’s original family and ally organization.

Comprised of family members, friends, allies, and people who are LGBTQ+, PFLAG has a three-part mission of support, education, and advocacy that is carried out by its more than 350 chapters across the United States, in a network of more than 200,000 members and supporters.

PFLAG chapters continue to support families through the coming out process through peer support groups, but their work is much bigger than that. They offer unique community-based opportunities for allies to become more educated about equality-focused issues as well as ways to get engaged where they live. They’re a great way to get support in your ally journey as well as connect with other allies. Learn about PFLAG and find your local chapter by visiting pflag.org.



“I didn’t want to make her—or me—feel uncomfortable or start an argument...”

“I was talking to a friend who lives in the same assisted living center that I do. She was telling me about attending her granddaughter’s wedding, and asked how my grandson is doing. I said he’s well, but because I didn’t want to offend her, I neglected to mention that he and his partner of 10 years just had a beautiful wedding, which I proudly attended. I love my grandson and his husband, but sometimes I just don’t want to risk making other people uncomfortable by mentioning that he is gay. Worse, the thought of having to argue about it with someone just makes me back away.”

— Evelyn, 74

Of all the challenges that straight allies talk about, the fear of getting into an argument or making people uncomfortable always tops the list. We’re a culture where the idea of everyone being able to have their own opinion prevails, but when those opinions clash, well, awkwardness (or worse) ensues.

Am I going to lose a friend? Am I going to create a bad relationship with a neighbor? Might I hurt my personal brand at work because someone disagrees...strongly? Will what I say lead to some really awkward and uncomfortable silence? Will I end up getting excluded?

These are just a few of the questions asked by straight allies in moments of possible conflict. They also happen to be the same kinds of questions that many people who are LGBTQ+ are asking when they hit conflict, too. We tend to be the same like that.

It would be easy to say that you’ve just got to be brave and speak up, but that also would be silly and unreasonable. There are consequences to our actions, and understanding them needs to be a real calculation. But there are consequences to inaction, too. Big ones.

For allies (no matter where they are on their ally journey) understanding that there’s no one way to respond when potential conflict arises is important. It isn’t always about grabbing your soapbox and yelling. And that alone may make this fear seem just a bit more manageable.

SIDENOTE

If there's one thing that makes people panic, it's the thought of getting into an argument. Add the fear of consequences of arguments, and it creates a special recipe for shutting down. But conflict isn't always a bad thing. Often, it is the beginning of an important conversation, but only if you take on the discussion in a constructive way. Changing the way you approach disagreement can transform a moment of ally panic into a moment of ally win. Here are a few steps to try out when you feel yourself backing down, or not speaking up.

Take a deep breath: If you're extremely upset, the way that you approach the conversation will reflect it. Step back and let your temperature come down. Retract those claws.

Assume nothing: You don't always know what drives someone's opinion. Sure, it may be really gross bias. But it also might be because they didn't think or know what they said or did was hurtful, or because they thought people would see it as a joke. Give people room to explain.

Pick the right time and place: While there may be a momentary rush of self-satisfaction in making a scene as you point your finger, don't. Instead, approach the person and ask if you can have a quick private conversation.

Address the behavior: Be sure to explain what you're referring to—and then keep the conversation about that specific behavior. In other words, "I felt like the joke you made about gay people was really messed up," works because it makes the topic of conversation the joke. Whereas, "I am here to tell you that I think that you're a great big homophobic jerk" doesn't address the behavior, but attacks the person's character.

Explain why you're speaking up: Let people know why you felt that something is wrong and the impact that it had. Try something like this: "As someone who is a straight ally, I'm making an effort to talk to people when they say something that doesn't seem right. And I feel like the joke you made is insulting to people who are gay."

Listen and offer support: Listen to the other person to hear what they've got to say. Maybe they'll apologize or tell you they didn't think it would hurt anyone. Maybe they'll say something that helps you see where they're coming from. You won't know unless you're really listening. Let them know that you're a resource if they ever want to talk.

Say thank you: This is important. You've just done something big, and engaged someone else in the process. No matter how it goes, thank people for their time.



“What exactly am I supposed to do now?”

“I’m an ally. Well, maybe I’d call myself an ally in training. I want to do the right thing, and I know that the next part of my work is finding ways to be out there about my beliefs. But it leaves me wondering how I’m supposed to get conversations going. I mean, ‘I have a gay friend’ just sounds weird and not useful. But when I talk politics, people tend to back off. I’m at a loss here.”

— *Arthur, 23*

Right now, more people than ever know someone who is LGBTQ+, and with each day, it seems like more are identifying as allies. And while this momentum can be super-empowering, it doesn’t really provide much guidance for being allies outside of more “political” conversations.

Let’s face it. It can be pretty easy for straight allies to demonstrate their support at a Pride festival or even a political rally.

But in the absence of one of these opportunities, finding ways to still be out about your allyship isn’t always simple. How do allies keep the conversation about equality going—or, even more importantly, find ways to integrate it into everyday life? How can allies become people who can initiate conversations about equality in a wide variety of ways...you know, beyond, “I’ve got a lesbian friend”?

In the upcoming pages, you’ll find some basic, everyday changes you can make that will help you do it, so stay tuned.



Put your assumptions in check.

We're constantly making assumptions about people. Seriously, all of us do it. Because of where someone is from, the kind of work they do, their family background, their religious beliefs (or lack thereof), their appearance, the way they speak—and much more—we make snap judgements about what kinds of people they are and where their values lie.

But that's just what we're doing: *making snap judgements*. And they're based on the little info that we have, and, importantly, our own biases, conscious or unconscious.

So here's your first invitation to action as an ally: Put your assumptions in check about who is (and is not) supportive of LGBTQ+ equality, or even about their willingness to engage in a conversation about LGBTQ+ inclusion.

How many people have you not spoken to about LGBTQ+ topics because, for whatever reason (let's say where they're from) you've assumed that they won't be supportive? And since your decision was based on an assumption about "people who are _____" and not necessarily fact, you may have missed a huge opportunity to talk.

As you put those assumptions in check, you'll start to see that people will often surprise you. They may not always be where you want them to be on their ally journey, but you'll never know—or know how you can support them—until you give them a chance. So try to be willing to have that conversation rather than hoping someone else will.

“

A friend at work who is involved with our company's LGBTQ+ network group invited me an upcoming event. I accepted, thanked him and said 'I really want you to feel comfortable being out about your lifestyle.' He looked a little shocked. I wasn't sure what had gone wrong, because I felt like I was being supportive.

My friend finally said, 'I'm glad that you are supportive, and I want you to be there, but just know that when you say lifestyle, it is offensive to me and a lot of people. I just want to be honest with you.' Then he explained why he said it in greater detail.

I had no idea about how the word can make some people feel. I was kind of embarrassed and find myself worried about what to say and what not to say.

”

John, 57

Get educated.

Don't know what's going on with "LGBTQ+ issues"?

Confused about terminology?

Not sure what all of those rainbows mean?

Unsure if you're about to say something that's going to offend someone?

It's ok. We've all been there...and there's a way to feel better. To put it really simply, it's time to learn some stuff. (Professional, right?)

One of the best ways to demonstrate your interest in moving equality forward and in being an ally is to get—and keep getting—educated. But this is more than just saying, "Ok, I will. Later."

Make the commitment right now to finding the answer when you don't understand something. The leap between being someone who's kind of interested in the issue and being someone who is an active ally is an enthusiasm to learn. (Remember all that stuff about allies at the start of the book?) That leap actually entails not letting questions wait for an answer at some unexpected time in the future, but getting answers when you need them.

Go online. Ask questions. Do some research. Reach out to other allies who might have grappled with the same challenge.

Have LGBTQ+ friends? You can also ask for their help. Just be aware that not everyone is comfortable speaking about some issues, their personal experiences, or being your go-to resource. So be willing to accept "no" as an answer, and have a backup plan for finding what you need. (You know, a trusted resource. Like straightforequality.org.)



“I was just embarrassed because of what I didn’t know.”

“My city was voting on a nondiscrimination bill, but I didn’t even know what it was! I knew it involved LGBTQ+ people, but I was too embarrassed to ask anything beyond that. What if someone thought I didn’t know because I didn’t care?

So I went online and Googled ‘Springfield and gay’ and learned there is no law in my town or my state that protects LGBTQ+ people from discrimination at work or from being evicted from their homes! Who knew? Not me, actually. But once I had a better idea of what was happening, I was able to start talking to people about it. I felt comfortable to become part of the conversation and shared what I learned with some friends.”

— Denise, 35

When you hear about an issue on the news that you don’t understand, look it up, or ask a friend. When a LGBTQ+ coworker uses a term that you don’t know — like “queer” — ask what it means. Why exactly are there rainbow flags all over the pride parade each year? What’s with the pink triangles? Chances are that people will be pretty impressed that you took an interest in wanting to say the right thing or to understand what’s going on.



Get some good advice.

One of the places that millions of people have gone for individual advice is to one of the highest-profile straight allies in the world. **Dear Abby** has been dispensing wise words for people since 1956. Many times, she’s offered guidance on how to talk about issues whether you’re an ally, family member, or LGBTQ+ yourself. Her columns appear in more newspapers each week than any other column in the world, so find her in your local newspaper or go online to dearabby.com.

But Dear Abby isn’t alone in dispensing great advice for allies. If you’re looking for advice on modern manners when it comes to LGBTQ+ and ally etiquette? Check out **Steven Petrow’s “Civilities”** column in the *The Washington Post* or his book, *Steven Petrow’s Complete Gay & Lesbian Manners: The Definitive Guide to LGBT Life*. Learn more at stevenpetrow.com.

And remember: Rome wasn't built in a day. Similarly, becoming an ally is rarely an overnight transformation.

You don't need to learn everything before you can participate as an ally. Hard as it is to accept, you're probably going to make a mistake somewhere along the line. We all do. But when that fateful day comes and someone provides feedback, apologize for the error, ask for guidance (for example, "Can you explain more to me about the word 'queer' so I understand it better moving forward?"), say thank you, and move on.

This does bring up a really big point.

Allies know about the importance of listening. And by "importance" we mean "you need to really, really, really take your responsibility to keep listening to people's stories and feedback super-seriously, no matter how much you know."

As a person gets more confident in their abilities to demonstrate support, there's a natural tendency to think that they're an expert and have little more to learn. It's true of nearly anything people are passionate about, from one's vast knowledge of, let's say the Star Trek canon, to baseball, to being a great ally.

The problem is that once you slip into that "I've got this" place, you may not be listening to the incredibly diverse stories and needs of your LGBTQ+ friends and colleagues.

So constantly keep your ears, mind, and heart open to learning more and knowing that just when you think you've learned it all, the conversation changes.* There's a lot more out there to understand. The ally journey doesn't end when you feel like you're at Super-Ally status. It actually goes on forever.

**Obergefell v. Hodges, anyone? Not sure of the reference? How about Googling it now? Remember that stuff about committing to finding the info you need to be a strong ally? Yep. That.*



Take advantage of the power of language

One of the starting points for many allies—and, honestly, a point to which many allies and LGBTQ+ people return—is language. The terms associated with the LGBTQ+ community are vast, important, and evolve rapidly. Notably, they are a great way to keep educated and offer lots of ways to start moving what you learn into action.

To get started on your linguistic journey, check out the *equality literacy* section starting on page 43. It will give you a few starting points on what many of the key terms that you'll need to know mean. When you're ready for even more, check out the more expanded *equality literacy* cheat sheet by visiting straightforequality.org/glossary.

Once you know the terms, put them to work. For some people, just saying words like “gay” or “bisexual” out loud and comfortably is a big step. For others, the gay-b-c’s are a breeze, even with new letters being added so frequently. Regardless of where you are, being the person who can say, “I can explain that one!” gives you the chance to put yourself out there as an ally and become a great source for information to someone.

And once you're feeling on top of definitions, expand your language skills. Practice using inclusive terms like “partner” or “spouse” (in place of “boyfriend/husband” and “girlfriend/wife”) when you meet people for the first time to demonstrate that you're not making any assumptions about them. Once you know someone's preferred terms, use and respect them. But until that time, demonstrate that you're not assuming anything based on your perception of their gender.

It may even turn into a learning moment, too—if someone asks why you're using those terms, be ready to tell them, and let them know you're an ally!

PSSST!

Still got that scenario on page 22 on your mind? Let's break it down.

For a long time, the term "lifestyle"—as in "gay lifestyle"—was considered to be an acceptable way to talk about the lives about people who are gay or lesbian. But language and how we understand each other changes. Now the term is widely considered to be offensive.

Why?

Think about it. When you mention a *lifestyle*, it generally suggests something someone prefers to live, like the choice to have a vegan lifestyle, for example. But we're not talking about a *preference*, but rather an individual's *orientation*. Ask the American Medical Association, American Psychological Association, or the Surgeon General. People are who they are. So the sound of "gay lifestyle" sounds like the underlying suggestion is choice, and something that can be "cured". It also minimizes the tremendous diversity that exists within the LGBTQ+ community, suggesting that there's only one way of being a member of the group's "lifestyle"—which is far from reality.

Looking for an alternate way to communicate the point? Consider using "the lives of people who are gay and lesbian" instead. In John's case, he could have said, "being out at work" instead of "being out about your lifestyle."

See? We promised that we'd be here to teach you stuff. Mission accomplished.

“

So I was at work and someone told this joke:

‘A male-friendly lesbian, a man-hating dyke, Santa Claus, and the Easter bunny are in a race for a \$100 bill. Which one wins?

The man-hating dyke because the other three are figments of your imagination.’

Most people around me were laughing. To this day I really regret not saying, ‘Dude, that’s really offensive. Stop.’ But I was focused on people thinking that I don’t have a sense of humor or maybe even that *I’m* gay. Those concerns just shut me down.

”

Rishi, 25

Speak up.

Everyone's been there. Whether it is a racist joke, sexist joke, or a gay joke, we've all heard humor that we knew was offensive, but, for one of many reasons, haven't said anything to object. Whether we didn't want to be the PC police, felt frozen because we didn't know the words, or we just didn't want to sound like a buzzkill, we knew something should be said... but we just didn't say it.

While some kinds of jokes and comments are clearly taboo (most people wouldn't make a racist joke at a staff party), jokes about people who are LGBTQ+ tend to continue to slide by without much pushback. In fact, upwards of 41% of people who are LGBTQ+ say that they've heard gay and lesbian jokes in their workplaces.

And it isn't always the jokes: often comments are made about people who are LGBTQ+ that, regardless of their intent, are hurtful. For many people who are LGBTQ+, having a person describe a Pride parade as people "flaunting their lifestyles" can be devastating. And yet, often no one will intervene when these kinds of things are said.

So think about this:

Imagine that there's a closeted person on your team at work who heard the comment and felt shame because they couldn't respond without outing themselves. Or think about the man who has a lesbian daughter and hears friends at work frequently make derogatory comments about lesbians. It's personal for him, even if he isn't LGBTQ+. Sadly, he may also be worried about the consequences of speaking up and objecting to his friends' remarks.

When you speak up as an ally, your courage speaks to them.

Allies often have an opportunity to address situations that others feel they cannot. When you intervene, you're educating people around you, and demonstrate that you are supportive of equality and inclusion for all. Your voice sends a powerful message that you're advocating for your LGBTQ+ friends, family, classmates, and colleagues because you care about how these jokes and comments make people feel, regardless of intent.

The challenge is, however, that while most people know that they should intervene, they're not sure how to do it effectively and in a way that is respectful for everyone involved.

Don't worry. We've got your back.



“I didn’t want to make her look bad...”

“The people I work with love talking about celebrity gossip and all of the pop culture news out there. On Monday morning, I heard Mary, one of my co-workers, talking about how unfair it was that one comedian got so much heat for calling a photographer a ‘faggot’ and that he shouldn’t have felt like he had to apologize for his comments.

I really like Mary. She’s my friend and I didn’t want to embarrass her or make her look bad in front of others. But I really felt like I needed to say something, so I commented, ‘But what if he had used the n-word? Would you think he should apologize then? Or what if you had a gay son or daughter who heard that? Would you have defended him?’ At first she seemed annoyed, but later we had a great conversation and she conceded that she never thought about it that way.”

— *Charlotte, age 44*

A couple of things happened here. First, Charlotte knew that the situation was tough. She didn’t want to call her friend out, but she didn’t want to be quiet, which would have sent a message that she was in agreement. So she used two great ally strategies. First, she found a softer way to bring attention to the situation without attacking her friend. But then she did something just as important—she followed up with a personal conversation where she really had the time, space, and privacy to talk to her coworker. It wasn’t easy, but it had a big positive impact both on her group and on her friendship with Mary.



How to say, “I object!” without sounding bossy.

Figuring out ways to intervene when a negative comment is made isn’t easy since you’re balancing relationships and working to have respect for differences. Based on countless conversations with allies about what works, the Straight for Equality team at PFLAG National offers these suggestions:

Use appropriate humor to avoid seeming confrontational from the start.

Phrases like, “Not to be the buzzkill, but...” often give you an opening to start the conversation without people getting a sense that you’re about to climb on your soapbox. Exclusionary comments are serious, and should be taken seriously, but find a way to keep the conversation lighter so people don’t shut down in anticipation of a lecture.

Use facts.

Many times, people don’t realize that their jokes are often making light of serious situations. So having some information in your head (remember that part about becoming an educated ally?) is helpful. Then you can create learning moments, launching with phrases like, “A lot of people don’t know that...” to help you focus on the un-funny aspects of the remark made.

Make your comment relatable.

People often forget to think about how they’d feel in a similar situation should the tables have turned. Perhaps you can ask them, “How would you feel if someone had poked fun at your...” or “How would you feel if everyone was laughing at the expense of someone you love?” Helping people understand the impact of a comment without insulting or minimizing their background helps refocus things.

Explain why you’re having the conversation—and say you’re an ally!

Your ally conversations shouldn’t be random. Mention that you’re an ally and why: “I consider myself to be an ally who wants everyone to feel included, and I don’t like to let things like this slide because exclusionary behavior hurts everyone, not just the group directly being excluded.”

Also, remember that speaking up it isn't just about jokes and overtly exclusionary comments. People make huge generalizations and assumptions about people who are LGBTQ+ frequently based on stereotypes and misconceptions. And just as frequently, those assumptions are also wrong.

How many times have you heard, "He dresses well, he must be gay"? Or "She won't go out with me, so she must be a lesbian"? (Ever think that she doesn't like you because of the joke you just told?) What about, "People aren't bisexual! They just haven't met the right person"? Or even, "Oh, the LGBTQ+ community is so wealthy"?

Misinformation and stereotypes can be just as harmful and damaging as jokes especially when they go unchallenged and eventually get accepted as "fact." While there's been lots of progress in some ways for people who are LGBTQ+, there are huge challenges that remain across a variety of issues. Did you know that in many states, qualified people who are LGBTQ+ can't foster or adopt children? Or that people who are LGBTQ+ don't just live in big cities like New York and San Francisco, but actually live in every single state? Or that in the transgender community, poverty and unemployment rates significantly outpace those of the population as a whole?*

The point is this: As an ally, being able to call some of these generalizations into question and create learning moments is a huge project and opportunity. As a real, fact-based understanding of the lives of people who are LGBTQ+ expands, the chance that others will base their opinions on fact (and not misleading assumptions) increases.

**Also, some gay men are not well-dressed. Some lesbians love unreasonably high heels. And bisexuality is a real identity for people. True story.*



Take your conversations online

Often, we think about demonstrating allyship when we're in the middle of a conversation or an argument. But there's another great way for you to identify as an ally and educate people around you: Why not use social media? (Come on. You're probably Tweeting right now. Tweet us at [@S4Equality](#), please.)

More and more, allies are saying that they've used the simplicity of sharing information on social networks like Facebook and Twitter as their way of educating and engaging people. Think about the impact that being an online advocate can have. News outlets actually covered the fact that in 2015, following the Supreme Court decision on marriage, more than 26 million people turned their Facebook profile pictures rainbow to show their support for equality, and many of those people were allies. That news certainly started more than a few discussions online.

Why not make your online efforts happen year round? Straight for Equality has feeds on both Twitter and Facebook ([facebook.com/S4Equality](#)), so getting content to share is simple. Just like or follow us.

But don't stop there—lots of conversations happen after people post articles or images. Engage in online conversations with people in your networks, and the same rules apply as in-person conversations. When someone says something exclusionary, don't let it slide. Take a deep breath if you're aggravated, and be willing to share information to clear up misunderstandings or big assumptions.

It's just one more way to get yourself out there as an active ally.

“

I've been an ally for as long as I can remember. In all honesty, I didn't have a choice in the matter. My parents actively boycotted Cracker Barrel when I was a kid, scolded my siblings and me if we used the word 'gay' as an insult, and included openly LGBTQ+ people in our lives from day one.

Even so, I know there are times when I struggle to be an out and active ally. Some days I'm just not in the mood to be the one who speaks up, or I find myself making assumptions about who I can talk to about LGBTQ+ issues. I have to remember that while ally is a usually a noun, it is verb, too. My voice matters in both big and small ways—and I need to keep using it.

”

Janie, 30

Come out as an active ally.

This is the point at which the Straight for Equality team starts crossing their fingers and hoping that you're feeling the ally love. We've covered a lot of ground together in these pages, and, unfortunately, we're almost at the end of this book.

But the end of this book is actually the beginning for you, no matter where you are on your ally journey, and here's why: this is the place where you're going to need to start coming out as an ally and getting more active.

Reaching a point where you believe that straight allies are important—and wanting to be one—is a huge deal, and we'd never minimize that accomplishment. However, while feeling like an ally and even identifying as one is good, starting to find ways (at your own pace) to express your allyship takes you from good to *brilliant*.

Recently, some polling was released that revealed an interesting trend. When men and women across the United States were asked if they consider themselves to be workplace allies to people who are LGBT, the numbers were awesome: 70% and 83%, respectively.*

But then those pollsters asked an interesting little follow-up question: Do you consider yourself to be an active ally? They gave a wide berth for what was considered to be active—speaking up at a meeting, talking about LGBT inclusion with a colleague or client, or even just supporting an LGBT coworker. And something kind of scary happened. Those great numbers then dropped to 8% and 19%.

Kind of a downer, right?

**Not a typo! We're only using LGBT (not LGBTQ+) here because that was the language used in the poll.*

To many people, it spoke to the challenge of ensuring that allies know that their support can't be just something they *feel*. In other words, to make real and lasting culture change, straight allies are going to have to find ways to actively demonstrate support. They need to become great models for helping others see what allyship looks like and what it can accomplish.

The number of places where an ally can express their support is limitless. Your workplace (maybe by joining your LGBTQ+ and ally employee network group), house of worship, school, civic organizations, with your family...all of these spaces offer opportunities to get a conversation started, or, for some, transform the way that those conversations—and the actions that come after—play out.



“I thought it would be too political...”

“I’m a teacher at a small school. One of the guidance counselors expressed a lot of frustration and even anger over a new policy that requires counselors to receive special training to help them work with LGBTQ+ youth. She was clearly agitated and didn’t see why she should have to do it and mentioned that it was unnecessary because (in her opinion) none of the students at our school are gay. She said it personally offended her.

My first inclination was to let it go and keep what felt like politics out of work, but I thought about how her attitude could affect the kids. What would happen to a student who goes to her for help? So I told her about all the newspaper articles I’ve read about how LGBTQ+ youth get bullied, how their fear and shame impacts their grades, and even how attempted suicide rates were way higher in this group. I just wanted to point out that many of these kids desperately need support, and frankly, being able to provide this support is part of our job responsibilities.

It may not have changed everything, but it started to reframe the discussion, and I realized that even though I was just sharing what I learned, it was a big help in changing the climate of my school, and that it wasn’t about politics at all.”

— Joe, 61

As the old adage goes, change starts at home...and at work...and at school. We could go on, but the point is that small changes (like not letting something that sounds wrong go unchecked) matter. Sure, there's a chance that someone will push back, but sometimes, if allies don't speak up, the conversation will never happen in the first place.

If a concern about getting into a political debate is your barrier, try finding different ways to address an issue. In the story, Joe opted to make it about the kids that school counselors serve and their real needs, rather than go to a conversation about the politics of changing school or district policy. It was a way to still speak up, but in a space that was comfortable for him. Change doesn't have to be about politics and policies, but about people.



Getting to the issues

Are you ready to learn more about key advocacy issues that affect the LGBTQ+ community? Have an idea as to what issues you're interested in, but not sure where you can start getting more actively engaged? There are incredible global, national, state, and local organizations addressing these topics. Certainly PFLAG and Straight for Equality are a great place to start. Here are just a few more suggestions for places to check out to learn how you can boost your ally voice:

Advocacy: Human Rights Campaign | hrc.org

Faith: Institute for Welcoming Resources | welcomingresources.org

Global: International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association | ilga.org

Health: GLMA | glma.org

LGBTQ+ Parents: Family Equality Council | familyequality.org

Transgender: National Center for Transgender Equality | transequality.org

Schools: GLSEN | glsen.org

Workplace: Out & Equal Workplace Advocates | outandequal.org

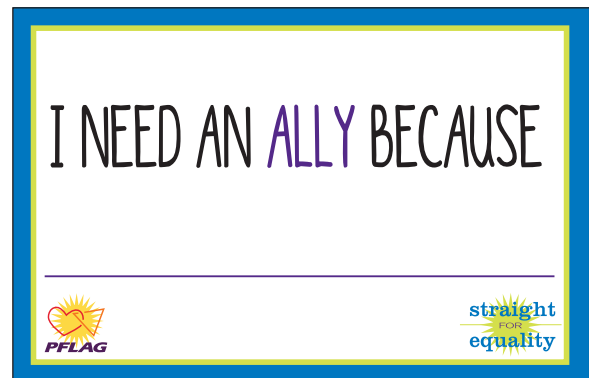
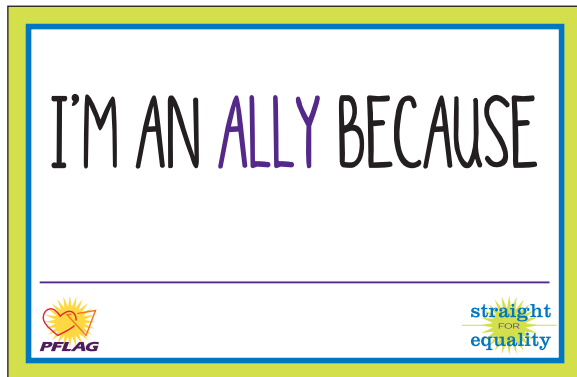
At-Risk LGBTQ+ Youth: The Trevor Project | thetrevorproject.org

There is one last thing we need to talk about before things wrap up here: being more visible.

Let's be clear—the ally journey rule still applies. Not everyone is going to be ready to start declaring their ally pride right away. It may take some learning and time. That's still true. But for many people who have identified as allies for a while, it is time to do even more by moving from private support to out allyship.

Admittedly, finding ways to make sure people see that you're an ally isn't without its challenges. There's no obvious characteristic that people can immediately see. (We were going to suggest stitching the letter A on all of your clothes, that option was taken and didn't work out well in the first place.) And while wearing some kind of ally t-shirt may be a good option at times, it's probably not going to fit in during formal events. And even beyond that, just saying that you're an ally doesn't always get things rolling as much as needed.

Of course, we've put some thought into this, too. Here's what we've got:



See how that works? Not only is displaying this card somewhere—your dorm room, your workspace at the office, your refrigerator, etc.—a way to send a message, but you’re making it unique and personal when you fill in that line about why you’re an ally. We give you the start, then you put your own brilliant ally brand on it.

There are two cards that we offer. One of them isn’t specifically for allies at all—in fact, they were originally designed for people who are LGBTQ+ to express why allies are needed in their lives. Over time, though, some allies have started using them to engage and ask for help from other allies in their work.*



Express yourself!

Ready to get your ally message out there? You can download this card from the Straight for Equality website (straightforequality.org/allycampaign). If you are interested in purchasing the card for a group activity, you’ll find information there about how to do it. You can also reach out to the Straight for Equality team for more information.

You’re not done yet, though. Here’s the extra credit invite for the super-ambitious:

After you’ve filled out your card, take a photo with your ally statement and Tweet it to us [@S4Equality](https://twitter.com/S4Equality), hashtag [#ally](https://twitter.com/ally) and [#pflag](https://twitter.com/pflag) or tag us in your Facebook post ([@Straight for Equality](https://www.facebook.com/StraightforEquality)). You can also e-mail us your photos at info@straightforequality.org, and we’ll be happy to share the pics of your gorgeous faces and awesome statements on the Straight for Equality website and on our social media feeds. It helps more people see the incredible diversity and power of allies and is just one more way for you to come out as an ally.

**Remember that if you’re looking for ways to learn more and express your trans allyship, visit straightforequality.org/trans.*

bye

for now.

This is, sadly, where we leave you.

But not for long.

This guide is hopefully only the start of your lifelong ally journey. The ball is rolling, and now it is time to see where you're going to take it. So here are just a few immediate next steps for you after you put down the (wonderful, intellectually stimulating) book you've just read.

1. Go to straightforequality.org and find out what's new.

While you're there, you'll be able to access the latest news and resources from the Straight for Equality project, including materials and publications on faith, healthcare, and transgender inclusion. You'll also be able to access all of the other Straight for Equality materials. (May we suggest the *guide to being a trans ally* as a next step?) All resources can be downloaded for free, or you can purchase copies of print editions. Remember to follow us on Twitter ([@S4Equality](https://twitter.com/S4Equality)) and Like us on Facebook (facebook.com/S4Equality) to keep getting updates, too.

2. Check out the PFLAG National website.

As the nation's original family and ally organization, PFLAG continues to provide support, education, and advocacy to people who are LGBTQ, their families, friends, and allies. Know someone who needs help with coming out? PFLAG's got your back. Want to learn more about equality issues in your community and how you can get involved? There's a chapter waiting for you to join in. Interested in issue advocacy at the local, state, and federal level? We promise to help get you engaged. Visit pflag.org to learn more. If you want to find your local chapter right away, go to pflag.org/find and you can enter your state or zip code.

3. Pass this book along to someone else and then talk about it.

We understand. You may be pretty attached to this wonderful book by now. (At least we hope that you are.) But now it's time to use this guide to get one of those important ally conversations going. Pick someone around you—maybe a friend or a sibling—and give it to them. Tell them why you'd like them to read it. ("Those Straight for Equality people told me to do it" is *not* an acceptable reason.) Then circle back in a few days and ask them what they thought. Changing the world really does start with something that simple.

That's it for now, though. Thanks for sticking around until the end. The work you've done—and the work you're about to do—is important and it is valued, sometimes by people you'll never even meet. Exercise that ally power, and help move equality forward.

We still can't do it without you.

equality literacy

Ready to have your straight ally conversations?

Here's a list of terms that will help make your efforts even more effective. Remember that terminology is constantly evolving. It may change over time, so if you're unsure about a word, check online by visiting one of the many resource sites we list in this book and on our website, straightforequality.org.

Affirmed gender: The gender to which someone who is transgender has transitioned. This term is often used to replace terms like “new gender” or “chosen gender,” which imply that the current gender was not always a person's gender or that their gender was chosen rather than simply in existence.

Agender: A person who does not conform to any gender.

Ally: A term typically used to describe someone who does not identify as LGBTQ+ but who is supportive of LGBTQ+ equality in its many forms and through a wide variety of different expressions, both personal and private. This term also can be used by LGBTQ+ people when they demonstrate support for different members of the community (e.g., a lesbian being an ally to a person who is transgender).

Asexual: A person who does not experience sexual attraction.

Assigned gender: The gender that is given to an infant at birth typically based on the infant's external genitals. This may or may not match the person's gender identity.

Assigned sex: The sex (male, female, intersex) that is assigned to an infant at birth.

Biological sex: Sex determined by the physical characteristics of the body at birth, such as genetic markers and internal/external genitalia. Biological sex may differ from identity.

Bisexual: An individual who is emotionally, romantically, and/or physically attracted to men and women. This is sometimes stated as “bi.” People who are bisexual need not have had equal sexual experience with both men and women and need not have had any sexual experience at all; it is attraction that determines orientation.

Cisgender: A term used to describe an individual whose gender identity aligns with the one typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. This is a term that is preferable to “non-trans,” “biological,” or “natal” man or woman.

Coming out: For people who are LGBTQ+, the process of self-acceptance that continues throughout one’s life. People often establish an LGBTQ+ identity to themselves first and then may decide to reveal it to others. Coming out can also apply to the family and allies of people who are LGBTQ+. There are many different degrees of being out: some may be out to friends only, some may be out publicly, and some may be out only to themselves. It’s important to remember that not everyone is in the same place when it comes to being out, and to respect where each person is in that process of self-identification. It is up to each person, individually, to decide if and when to come out or disclose.

Disclosure: The act or process of revealing one’s transgender or gender nonconforming identity to another person in a specific instance. Some people who are trans-identified dislike the term and prefer “coming out” so it is a best practice to ask which term an individual uses in their personal lexicon.

Gay: The adjective used to describe people whose emotional, romantic, and/or physical attraction is to people of the same sex (e.g., gay man, gay people). In contemporary contexts, “lesbian” is often a preferred term for women. People who are gay need not have had any sexual experience; it is attraction that helps determine orientation.

Gender: A set of social, psychological, or emotional traits, often influenced by societal expectations that classify an individual as the binaries of either feminine or masculine.

Gender-affirming surgery: Surgical procedures that help people adjust their bodies in a way that more closely matches or desired gender identity. Not every transgender person will desire or have resources for surgery. This should be used in place of the older and often offensive term “sex change.”

Gender binary: The concept that there are only two genders, male and female, and that everyone must be one or the other.

Gender expression: The manner in which a person chooses to communicate their gender identity to others through external means such as clothing and/or mannerisms. This communication may be conscious or subconscious and may or may not reflect their gender identity or sexual orientation. While most people’s understandings of gender expressions relate to masculinity and femininity, there are countless combinations that may incorporate both masculine and feminine expressions—or neither—through androgynous expressions. The important thing to remember and respect is that every gender expression is valid.

Gender identity: One’s deeply held personal, internal sense of being male, female, some of both, or neither. One’s gender identity does not always correspond to biological sex (e.g., a person assigned female at birth identifies as male or a person assigned male at birth identifies as female). Awareness of gender identity is usually experienced in infancy and reinforced in adolescence.

Gender neutral: Not gendered. Can refer to language (including pronouns), spaces (like bathrooms), or identities (being genderqueer, for example).

Gender nonconforming: A person who views their gender identity as one of many possible genders beyond strictly female or male. This is an umbrella term that can encompass other terms such as “gender creative,” “gender expansive,” “genderqueer,” “gender fluid,” “gender neutral,” “bigender,” “androgynous,” or “gender diverse.” Such people feel that they exist psychologically between genders, as on a spectrum, or beyond the notion of the male and female binary model.

Homosexual: An outdated clinical term often considered derogatory and offensive, as opposed to the preferred terms, “gay” and “lesbian.”

Lesbian: A woman whose emotional, romantic, and/or physical attraction is to other women. People who are lesbians need not have had any sexual experience; it is attraction that helps determine orientation.

LGBTQ+: An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning which refers to these individuals collectively. It is sometimes stated as “GLBT” (gay, lesbian, bi, and transgender). Occasionally, it is stated as “LGBTA” to include allies. The plus symbol (+) signals a recognition of all identities not specifically mentioned in the acronym, such as asexual and genderqueer.

Queer: A term currently used by some people—particularly youth—to describe themselves and/or their community. Some value the term for its defiance, some like it because it can be inclusive of the entire community, and others find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities. Traditionally a negative or pejorative term for people who are gay, “queer” is disliked by some within the LGBTQ+ community, who find it offensive. Due to its varying meanings, this word should only be used when self-identifying or quoting someone who self-identifies as queer (e.g., “My cousin self-identifies as queer.”)

Questioning: A term used to describe those who are in a process of discovery and exploration about their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or a combination thereof.

Sex: Refers to biological, genetic, or physical characteristics that define males, females, and people who are intersex. These can include genitalia, hormone levels, genes, or secondary sex characteristics. Sex is often compared or interchanged with gender, which is thought of as more social and less biological, though there is some considerable overlap.

Sexual orientation: Emotional, romantic, or sexual feelings toward other people. People who are straight experience these feelings primarily for people of the opposite sex. People who are gay or lesbian experience these feelings primarily for people of the same sex. People who are bisexual experience these feelings for people of both sexes. And people who are asexual experience no sexual attraction at all. Other terms describing sexual orientation include (but are not limited to) pansexual and polysexual. Sexual orientation is part of the human

condition—while sexual behavior involves the choices one makes in acting on one's sexual orientation. One's sexual activity does not define who one is with regard to one's sexual orientation; it is attraction determines their orientation.

Transgender: A term that may be used to describe people whose gender expression does not conform to the cultural norms and/or whose gender identity is different from their sex assigned at birth. Transgender is also considered by some to be an “umbrella term” that encompasses a number of identities which transcend the conventional expectations of gender identity and expression, including trans man, trans woman, genderqueer, and gender expansive. People who identify as transgender may or may not decide to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically to match their gender identity. For more information on people who are trans and how you can be a trans ally, check out the *guide to being a trans ally* on the Straight for Equality website (straightforequality.org/trans).

Transition: The process one goes through to discover and/or affirm their gender identity. This can, but does not always, include taking hormones, having surgeries, or going through therapy.

*the incredibly detailed honest forthright fully comprehensive completely blunt shockingly simple wonderfully helpful and witty exposition on a topic that sometimes makes people blanch but really shouldn't because this compelling open and straight to the point no pun intended little publication will demystify the secret world of gay people and be your tried and trusted **guide to being a straight ally***

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- *read this before you put your metatarsals between your mandible and maxillae: straight for equality in healthcare*
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are available for download or purchase at straightforequality.org. We've got other ally-friendly goodies there, along with details on how you can bring a Straight for Equality in the Workplace learning session to where you work. Seriously, we're smart and funny in person.

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About PFLAG National:

Straight for Equality is a program of PFLAG National.

Founded in 1972 with the simple act of a mother publicly supporting her gay son, PFLAG is the original family and ally organization. Made up of parents, families, friends, and allies uniting with people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+), PFLAG is committed to advancing equality through its mission of support, education, and advocacy. PFLAG has more than 350 chapters and 200,000 supporters crossing multiple generations of American families in major urban centers, small cities, and rural areas in all 50 states.

This vast grassroots network is cultivated, resourced, and supported by the PFLAG National office (located in Washington, D.C.), the National Board of Directors, and the Regional Directors Council. PFLAG is a nonprofit organization that is not affiliated with any political or religious institution.

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