

LGBT Communities and Domestic Violence

Information & Resources

KEY ISSUE

Use of Language/Vocabulary



prepared by

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KEY ISSUE

Use of Language/Vocabulary

Language can expand or restrict thought, promote equality or create bias. There is power in naming one's own reality, and it is, therefore, important to respect the fact that not everyone will identify with the terms presented in this packet.

Language is strongly influenced by factors such as race, ethnicity, culture, class and age. Individuals and communities continually experiment with language to express accurately the unique character and evolving experience of their lives. It is, therefore, important for advocates to pay attention to the words different people in same-gender/gender-variant relationships use to refer to themselves and their experiences in the particular community in which they are working.

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Advocates and activists working with members of culturally diverse communities have learned the value of a common language and the importance of listening to each person's choice of language when interpreting their own experiences, identity and culture. Any one term may not describe the identity or experience of a particular individual or community. Individuals who use language that is inappropriate because of the bias or prejudice the words carry may not convey the message they intend.

For the purposes of this collection of information packets, there was deliberate selection of the terms used and how they were used. For example, the words "lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," and "trans" or the abbreviation "LGBT" are consistently used, not to exclude people who might identify differently, but because the available literature by and for non-heterosexual people and those with differing gender identities directs us to do so. As the language evolves and more information becomes accessible, every effort will be made to keep these narratives as integrated and respectful as possible.

LGBT people are not members of a monolithic community or unified culture. Each lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans individual holds membership in many overlapping communities that face similar as well as very different issues. These individuals may have little in common – they may have different cultural or ethnic characteristics, they may speak different languages or come from different class backgrounds. They do, however, share a sexual orientation and or gender identity that differs from what is considered "normal" in mainstream United States culture and so they all experience homophobic oppression and the consequences of heterosexist privilege.

People who identify as “lesbian” or “gay” usually have primary intimate relationships with partners of their own gender. People who identify as “bisexual” usually have primary intimate relationships with partners of the same or different genders. This direction of a person’s sexual attraction is considered sexual orientation. “Trans,” on the other hand, is not a sexual orientation, it is a gender identity. Gender identity involves all the ways individuals experience themselves as being female, male or something else. This is impacted by both the biological sex one is born to and social norms and expectations. For many, the sense of gender is congruent with the ideal of the biological sex of their birth body. For others, the sense of gender may be in opposition to these ideals or an eclectic combination of a wide range of possible characteristics. Trans has become an umbrella term for people who experience the gender they identify with as different from the biological gender they were born with, or who in some way transgress the restrictive gender boundaries and expectations of the dominant culture. Trans people may be lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual or something else. Therefore, the descriptors “same-gender” and “gender-variant,” used with the term “relationship,” means intimate relationships between and with people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans.

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Homophobia is a cultural construct, not a phobia in the clinical sense. It is a combination of at least three deeply ingrained prejudices: a general mistrust and dislike of difference, an aversion to same-gender sexual activity and an aversion to people who appear to blur or violate traditional gender roles. The expressions of homophobia differ depending on the degree and type of prejudice held, and range from personal discomfort to outright violence to systematic institutional discrimination against those perceived to be non-heterosexual or defying gender norms.

Heterosexism is the cultural assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that this is the “correct” way to be. It perpetuates the idea that people who are not heterosexual are somehow unnatural or at least less important and are perhaps responsible for their own oppression. The cultural assumption of universal heterosexuality bestows privileges on those assumed to be heterosexual, while rendering invisible or punishing those who are not. For example, many information forms give only the options of married, divorced, or single to define relationship status, refusing to acknowledge same-gender or gender-variant relationships. Men holding hands or kissing in public is considered a flagrant display of sexuality (and may be risking open attack), but there is no such censure of public displays of affection by a heterosexual couple. Discussion of an upcoming engagement or marriage is socially celebrated, but revelation of involvement in a same-gender relationship is considered a discussion of what the couple does in bed. A heterosexual couple can marry and enjoy many social and practical economic privileges that same-gender/gender-variant couples are denied because they cannot marry. These privileges include survivor benefits to spouses and non-biological children of Social Security, pensions and 401Ks; spousal access to welfare, immigration and taxation benefits; and rights to hospital visitation, school visitation, inheritance, and financial protection in the case of divorce.

The enclosed articles and glossaries introduce some terms that are, at this writing, being used in LGBT communities. They illustrate the scope of expression advocates might encounter in working with survivors of domestic violence; however, this selection attempts to be neither all-inclusive nor definitive. Because of the fluidity and dynamic nature of language, some terms will be quickly out-dated and new terms will be continually added to community vocabularies. (According to the Oxford English Dictionary Online, a minimum of 1,800 new words and meanings are added to the English language every three months.) They offer a brief glimpse into the rich and complex identities that form the fabric of LGBT communities. As advocates review these terms, however, it is important to guard against broad generalizations of behavior that too often result in stereotyping. It is essential that advocates are sensitive and remain flexible, able to acknowledge their own ignorance and respectfully ask the individual in question for clarification.

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Additional information on lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people and domestic violence is available through the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (telephone 212-714-1184, TTY 212-714-1134).

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ENCLOSURES

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