

REACTIONS TO ANTI-LGBTI STIGMA

Most of the research on the psychological effects of anti-LGBTI stigma has focused on the impact on LGBTI people. More limited research conducted on heterosexual allies suggests that they sometimes have the same or similar responses as LGBTI people. Not all LGBTI people (or heterosexual allies) will react in the same way to these situations. But all LGBTI people and their allies would do well to consider the possibility that they will be affected by the anti-LGBTI climate. Research has suggested five prominent reactions: internalized homophobia/transphobia, anger, fear, sadness, and encounter with homophobia/transphobia.

INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA/TRANSPHOBIA

Over an extended period of time it's possible to absorb anti-LGBTI stigma. When that happens, people may question themselves more, may have more negative thoughts about their sexual and gender identities, and may experience reduced self-esteem. Another possible side effect of internalized homophobia is the devaluation of other LGBTI people or of the LGBTI community in general.

The more LGBTI people are aware that they have absorbed anti-LGBTI messages, the easier it is for them to undo them. This process of absorbing anti-LGBTI messages should be taken as a given, and energy is better spent countering the messages rather than criticizing ourselves.

Sometimes it helps to get information. For instance, some people have learned a great deal of factual and reassuring information from reading the printed material and web sites of pro-LGBTI organizations. Many people have found it very useful to spend lots of time in supportive venues within the LGBTI community, where they encounter real people rather than the myths, half-truths, and lies that make up much of the anti-LGBTI campaign rhetoric. It also helps to keep in mind that there are huge variations in LGBTI people. You will like some and not others; you will agree with some and not others; ultimately, **you cannot be responsible for representing anyone else and no one else is responsible for representing you.**

ANGER

LGBTI people may become frustrated and angry for a number of reasons, including because they feel unsafe, because they are talked about in such negative terms, because they are treated unfairly, because they feel hated, because they grow tired of being the object of debate.

Anger is an understandable reaction to such violations. Anger can be useful if a person translates it into some sort of productive action such as:

- Personal or social change or political action.
- Telling a friend.
- Writing a letter.
- Working out.
- Finding a pleasurable distraction.
- Getting support from others.

On the other hand, anger can become problematic if it sits and festers, when it becomes a pre-occupation, when it leads to social isolation or leads to you being broadly cynical. **Use your anger for positive change and growth.**

FEAR

Encounters with the homophobia & transphobia associated with anti-LGBTI stigma may understandably lead to fearfulness on the part of LGBTI people.

The fear may take many forms. Some common fears are:

- Being outed.
- Physical assault.
- Rejection
- Discrimination.
- Isolation.

This fear needs to be acknowledged, understood, and managed. People should take measures to ensure their safety to whatever degree possible. Having support from others who appreciate the fear can be very helpful, as well.

SADNESS

An encounter with homophobia or transphobia can evoke feelings of sadness. When sadness strikes for any reason, it is a signal that some sort of loss has occurred.

Sadness may represent a variety of possible losses:

- Innocence.
- Security.
- Sense of safety.
- Positive and even idealized views of people.
- Self-esteem.

Losses can be regained by:

- Solidifying remaining friendships.
- Grieving, preferably with the support of caring others, and then moving on.

ENCOUNTER WITH HOMOPHOBIA & TRANSPHOBIA

Most LGBTI people make efforts to create a comfortable life that protects them from the most obvious and harshest forms of homophobia and transphobia. Being in the middle of anti-LGBTI stigma forces LGBTI people to acknowledge and confront the fact that homophobia and transphobia are widespread, influences their lives, and has the potential for causing physical and psychological damage. This confrontation may be especially painful for individuals who have convinced themselves they were beyond being affected by homophobia and transphobia

EVERYONE REACTS TO ANTI-LGBTI STIGMA DIFFERENTLY

Members of the LGBTI community can have a range of reactions to anti-LGBTI stigma and discrimination. There is no way to know exactly how and when you will react, and even if you will react. It is important to support each other and to normalize the range of reactions that people experience.

Adapted from Russell, G. M. (2004). Surviving and thriving in the midst of anti-gay politics. *Angles*, 7(2), 1-7



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