

HAMPDEN-SYDNEY COLLEGE

SAFE ZONE MANUAL



Intercultural Affairs Committee • 2005

What it means to display a Safe Zone Sticker

You are indicating that you will be open to questions from and about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people and their issues. Questions may come from students who identify as LGBT or who are questioning their sexual orientation. Additionally, questions may come from students who are heterosexual and who are disturbed by the presence of an LGBT person in their classes, residence hall, or family. Colleagues also may have questions.

The Purpose of the Safe Zone Sticker

- The sticker helps to convey a message that you are supportive, trustworthy and sensitive to the needs and concerns of LGBT people.
- The sticker indicates that, within your office or room, homophobic and heterosexist comments and actions will not be tolerated silently, but instead will be addressed in an educational, informative, and non-threatening manner.

Guidelines for Those Who Display Safe Zone Stickers

- Respect the individual's privacy and the confidentiality of contacts.
- Keep in mind the *Cass Model of Sexual Identity Development* (page 7). Try to use language that reflects where the student is in his development.
- Refer students for counseling when appropriate. If a student is experiencing psychological distress and is having difficulty coping, suggest that counseling may be helpful to him. If you are feeling overwhelmed or worried about a student, refer him to Dr. Glen Bowman, Director of Counseling Services, (223-6107, Bagby Hall, Room 207).

- If your Safe Zone Sticker is defaced or torn down contact the Health Center for another. If you believe the act of vandalism was motivated by bias, you should report it to Campus Security as a hate crime.
- Keep this resource manual accessible.

Terminology

SEXUAL ORIENTATION: The desire for intimate emotional and sexual relationships with people of the other sex (heterosexual), of the same sex (homosexual), or of both sexes (bisexual). Sexual orientation is one of the four components of sexuality and is distinguished by an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual, or affectionate attraction to individuals of a particular gender. The three other components of sexuality are biological sex, gender identity (the psychological sense of being male or female), and social sex role (adherence to cultural norms for masculine and feminine behavior). Three sexual orientations are commonly recognized: "heterosexual," attraction to individuals of the other gender; "homosexual," attraction to individuals of one's own gender; or "bisexual," attractions to members of either gender. Sexual orientation is different from sexual behavior because it refers to feelings and self-concept. Persons may or may not express their sexual orientation in their behaviors.

GENDER IDENTITY: A person's sense of being male or female.

HOMOSEXUAL: Gay man or lesbian. A person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex.

GAY: Usually refers to a homosexual male, but can also refer to a homosexual female, as well as the gay community in general.

LESBIAN: The common and accepted term for homosexual females.

BISEXUAL: A person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same as well as the opposite sex.

HETEROSEXUAL: A person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex.

STRAIGHT: Another term for heterosexual.

TRANSGENDER: Relating to transsexuals, transvestites, cross-dressers, or anyone who tends to blur traditional gender boundaries.

TRANSSEXUAL: A person who strongly identifies with the opposite gender, usually including a desire to actually be the opposite sex. Most often refers to a person who has had a sex-change operation.

LGBT: A common abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (*e.g.* “LGBT community”).

TRANVESTITE: Someone who derives sexual pleasure from dressing in clothing generally identified with the opposite sex (cross-dressing). While the terms *homosexual* and *transvestite* have been used synonymously, they are in fact two different terms. The majority of transvestites are heterosexuals. Cross-dressing that does not include any sexual charge is usually referred to as *drag*.

HOMOPHOBIA: The irrational fear of homosexuals or homosexuality, or any behavior, belief, or attitude believed to indicate homosexuality or tolerance of homosexuality. In extreme cases, behavior includes violence.

IN THE CLOSET: May refer to a homosexual who has not yet accepted his or her own sexuality (to be “in the closet” to one’s self). Also may refer to one who chooses not to share their sexuality with friends, co-workers, or society (to be “in the closet” to everyone).

COMING OUT: Referring to the process by which one accepts one’s

own sexuality (to “come out” to one’s self). Also referring to the process by which one shares one’s sexuality with others (to “come out” to friends, etc.). This process is a continual, lifelong process for homosexual and bisexual individuals.

OPENLY GAY, LESBIAN, OR BISEXUAL / OPEN / OUT: Refers to someone who talks openly about his or her effectual and sexual orientation. Those who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual to others.

Gay and Bisexual Students

The college years are years of extreme change. Students are confronted with a variety of issues. Each issue is dealt with differently based on the student’s maturity and the experiences. As a result, the student who may be struggling with his sexual identity may have a more difficult task as these issues appear. Many activities during the undergraduate years encourage students to develop self-esteem and a distinct identity. For the gay student, answering the question “Who am I?” can be very difficult. Because homosexuality is not widely accepted or even seen as healthy or acceptable by many people, gay students begin the self-esteem battle a few steps back.

Gay students may question their self-worth and wonder where they fit into society and the college community. Also, the majority of the activities during the undergraduate years are heterosexually based. Whether it’s social functions or dating, the gay student can experience extreme anxiety as he decides to “play the game.” Coupled with this issue is the fact that most gays do not find a community with which to connect initially. As a result gay students may feel even more isolated

than heterosexual students.

During college years students also begin to make decisions about what role religion will play in their lives. For gay students, coming to terms with their religious beliefs can be a difficult task in light of the fact that homosexuality is not accepted in most religious environments. Other issues that will challenge gay students are coming to terms with their career goals and health related issues such as coping with AIDS and the fear that goes with it.

In addition, there are some unique issues that face gay or bisexual students that heterosexual students do not have to face. Men seem to be more anxious and concerned about the possibility that they might be gay than women. Once the identification has been made, men tend to view it as a discovery in that they have finally acknowledged their homosexuality.

In addition there are issues concerning:

- the loss of membership in the dominant culture and entry into a permanently stigmatized group.
- the experience of being a minority, especially an invisible minority and its impact on one's life.
- lack of family support or strong role models to help them deal with their found status and identity.
- potential lack of peer acceptance and support; isolation.

These and other issues may be some of the struggles experienced by those who approach you as a Safe Zone member. You, of course, cannot provide all the answers but your ability to listen and perhaps direct students to others who can be supportive and encouraging can have a significant impact.

Bisexual Development

There is less clarity about the developmental issues for bisexuals, and it is assumed that they experience many of the same issues as gays. However, there are some issues unique to the bisexual experience. The stigma attached to bisexuality in many ways is greater than that attached to homosexuality. Many are open about their identity but many also hide it from both the heterosexual and homosexual world, believing that neither will accept them. Although many bisexuals tend to align themselves with gay and lesbian communities, an individual's self identification as bisexual is frequently met with skepticism in the homosexual community and is seen as an attempt to avoid the stigma of homosexuality. There is an added pressure on bisexuals to identify as homosexual and behave in an exclusively homosexual manner.

Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students of Color

When a student is both a person of color and gay, that person may feel that only one part of his identity can be important. For many it is difficult to strike a balance that allows them to be empowered and liberated in both their identities. Multiple oppressions affect their lives because:

- They feel they do not know who they are.
- They do not know which part of themselves is more important,
- They do not know how to deal with one part of themselves oppressing another part of themselves.
- They do not have any one to talk to about the split they feel in their person.
- They feel misunderstood by each group if they consider both parts equally important.

- The experience of each racial or ethnic group is different depending on cultural values and beliefs about homosexuality and each person should be examined individually for the effects on his life of having a multiple identity.

Coming Out

Coming out is a process that happens again and again; it is not just a one-time event and it does not follow a linear course. It occurs initially when one acknowledges to oneself (the most important and difficult aspect of coming out) and to others that one is gay. One claims that orientation as his own and begins to be more or less public with it.

Coming out to oneself is one of the hardest steps in developing a positive gay identity for gay men. It involves much soul searching and introspection and a good healthy sense of self-appreciation and acceptance.

Coming out to others involves other risks and difficulties, depending on whom that person is coming out to, how engaged they are with them, how much power they have in the relationship, and how accepting they are.

Why come out? It is a necessary part of developing a healthy and positive identity as a gay individual. It is more honest and real and ends the stress of hiding or keeping a secret and living a double life. It reduces isolation and alienation and allows for increased support from other gay people. It allows gay people to live a fuller life.

What are people afraid of? Rejection and loss of relationship, especially family and friends who do not understand or approve. The real possibility of harassment and abuse from others, ranging from verbal

insults to physical violence against them or their possessions. Real possibility of institutionalized discrimination and prejudice.

There are stage-development theories which attempt to describe the process of coming out. Cass is the most widely known and used. Her model includes six stages that are not necessarily mutually exclusive (see the *Cass Model* on page 7).

Questions to Consider Before Coming Out

- Are you sure about your sexual orientation? Don't raise the issue unless you are able to respond with confidence to the question "Are you sure?" Confusion on your part will increase your parents' confusion and decrease their confidence in your conclusions.
- Are you comfortable with your gay sexuality? If you are wrestling with guilt and periods of depression, you will feel better off waiting to tell your parents. Coming out to them may require tremendous energy on your part; it will require a reserve of positive self-image.
- Do you have support? In the event that your parents' reaction devastates you, there should be someone or a group that you can confidently turn to for emotional support and strength. Maintaining your sense of self-worth is critical.
- Are you knowledgeable about homosexuality? Your parents will probably respond based on a lifetime of information from a homophobic society. If you've done some serious reading on the subject, you'll be able to assist them by sharing reliable information and research.
- What's the emotional climate at home? If you have the choice of when to tell, consider the timing. Choose a time when they're not dealing with such matters as the death of a close friend, pending surgery, or

the loss of a job.

- Can you be patient? Your parents will require time to deal with this information if they haven't considered it prior to your sharing. The process may last from six months to two years.
- What's your motive for coming out now? It should be because you love them and are uncomfortable with the distance you feel. Never come out in anger or during an argument, using your sexuality as a weapon.
- Do you have available resources? Homosexuality is a subject most non-gay people know little about. Have available at least one of the following: a book addressed to parents, a contact for the local or national PFLAG, or the name of a non-gay counselor who can deal fairly with the issue.
- Are you financially dependent on your parents? If you suspect they are capable of withdrawing college finances or forcing you out of the house, you may choose to wait until they do not have this weapon to hold over you.
- What is your general relationship with your parents? If you've gotten along well and have always known their love – and shared your love for them in return – chances are they will be able to deal with the issues in a positive way.
- What is their moral societal view? If they tend to see social issues in clear terms of good/bad or holy/sinful, you may anticipate that they will have serious problems dealing with your sexuality. If, however, they've evidenced a degree of flexibility when dealing with other changing societal matters, you may be able to anticipate a willingness to work this through with you.

- Is this your decision? Not everyone should come out to his or her parents. Don't be pressured into it if you're not sure you'll be better off doing so, no matter what their response.

When a Friend "Comes Out" to You . . .

- Thank your friend for having the courage to tell you. Choosing to tell you means that he has a great deal of respect and trust for you.
- Don't judge your friend. If you have strong religious or other beliefs about homosexuality, keep them to yourself for now. There will be plenty of time in the future for you to think and talk about your beliefs in light of your friend's orientation.
- Respect your friend's confidentiality. He probably is not ready to tell others right away and wants to tell people in his own way.
- Tell your friend that you still care about him, no matter what. Be the friend you have always been. The main fear for people coming out is that their friends and family will reject them.
- Don't be too serious. Sensitively worded humor may ease the tension you are both probably feeling.
- Ask any questions you may have, but understand that your friend may not have all the answers. You can save some questions for later or, better yet, you can find some of the answers together.
- Include your friend's partner in plans as much as you would with any other friend.
- Be prepared to include your friend in more of your plans. He may have lost the support of other friends and family, and your time and friendship will be even more precious to him. Offer and be available to support your friend as he "comes out" to others.

- Call frequently during the time right after your friend has come out to you. This will let him know you are still friends.
- Be prepared for your friend to have mood swings. Coming out can be very traumatic; anger and depression are common, especially if friends or family have trouble accepting your friend's orientation. Don't take mood swings personally.
- Do what you have always done together. Your friend probably feels that coming out will change everything in his life, and this is frightening. If you always go to the movies on Friday, then continue that.
- Talk about other LGBT people you know. If your friend knows you have accepted someone else, he will feel more comfortable that you will accept him.
- Don't allow your friend to become isolated.
- If your friend seems afraid about people knowing, there may be a good reason.
- Don't worry that your friend may have attractions or feelings for you that you may not share. If he has more or different feelings than you have, these can be worked through. It is the same as if someone of the opposite sex had feelings for you that you don't share. Either way, it's probably not worth losing a friend over.
- It's never too late. If someone has come out to you before and you feel badly about how you handled it, you can always go back and try again.

Sexual Identity: The Cass Model

ADAPTED FROM CASS, V. *HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT*, 1979.

1. IDENTITY CONFUSION

"Could I be gay?" Person is beginning to wonder if "homosexuality" is personally relevant. Denial and confusion is experienced.

Task: Who am I? - Accept, Deny, Reject.

Possible Responses: May avoid information about gays; inhibit behavior; deny homosexuality ("experimenting," "an accident," "just drunk"); may keep emotional involvement separate from sexual contact.

Possible Needs: Explore internal positive and negative judgments. Be permitted to be uncertain regarding sexual identity. Find support in knowing that sexual behavior occurs along a spectrum. Receive permission and encouragement to explore sexual identity as a normal experience (like career identity and social identity).

2. IDENTITY COMPARISON

"Maybe this does apply to me." Accepts the possibility that he may be gay. Self-alienation becomes isolation.

Task: Deal with social alienation.

Possible Responses: May begin to grieve for losses and the things he will give up by embracing his sexual orientation. May compartmentalize his own sexuality: accepts gay definition of behavior but maintains "heterosexual" identity of self. Tells himself, "It's only temporary"; "I'm just in love with this particular man," etc.

Possible Needs: Very important that the person develops own definitions. Needs information about sexual identity, gay community resources, and encouragement to talk about loss of heterosexual life expectations. Permitted

to keep some “heterosexual” identity (it is not an all-or-none issue).

3. IDENTITY TOLERANCE

“I’m not the only one.” Accepts the probability of being homosexual and recognizes sexual, social, emotional needs that go with being gay. Increased commitment to being gay.

Task: Decrease social alienation by seeking out lesbians and gays.

Possible Responses: Begins to talk and think about the issue. Recognizes that being gay does not preclude other options. Accentuates difference between self and heterosexuals. Seeks out gay culture (positive contact leads to more positive sense of self, negative contact leads to devaluation of the culture, stops growth). Tries out variety of stereotypical roles.

Possible Needs: Support in exploring own feelings of shame derived from heterosexism, as well as external heterosexism. Support in finding positive lesbian or gay community connections. It is particularly important for the person to know community resources.

4. IDENTITY ACCEPTANCE

“I will be okay.” Accepts, rather than tolerates, gay self-image. There is continuing and increased contact with the gay and lesbian culture.

Task: Deal with inner tension of no longer subscribing to society’s norm; attempt to bring congruence between private and public view of self.

Possible Responses: Accepts gay self-identification. May compartmentalize “gay life.” Maintains less and less contact with heterosexual community. Attempts to “fit in” and “not make waves” within the gay and lesbian community. Begins some selective disclosures of sexual identity. More social coming out; more comfortable being seen with groups of men or women that are identified as “gay.” More realistic evaluation of situation.

Possible Needs: Continue to explore grief and loss of heterosexual life expectations. Continue to explore internalized “homophobia” (learned shame for heterosexist society). Find support in making decisions about where, when, and to whom he self-discloses.

5. IDENTITY PRIDE

“I’ve got to let people know who I am!” Immerses self in gay and lesbian culture. Less and less involvement with heterosexual community. Us-them quality to political or social viewpoint.

Task: Deal with incongruent views of heterosexuals.

Possible Responses: Splits world into “gay” (good) and “straight” (bad). Experiences disclosure crises with heterosexuals, as he is less willing to “blend in.” Identifies gay culture as sole source of support; all gay friends, business connections, social connections.

Possible Needs: Receive support for exploring anger issues. Find support for exploring issues of heterosexism. Develop skills for coping with reactions and responses to disclosure of sexual identity. Resist being defensive.

6. IDENTITY SYNTHESIS

Develops holistic view of self. Defines self in a more complete fashion, not just in terms of sexual orientation.

Task: Integrate gay identity so that instead of being the identity, it is one aspect of self.

Possible Responses: Continues to be angry at heterosexism, but with decreased intensity. Allows trust of others to increase and build. Gay and lesbian identity is integrated with all aspects of “self.” Feels all right to move out into the community and not simply define space according to sexual orientation.