

TALKING ABOUT



Marriage & Relationship Recognition



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Overview

There is no question that marriage¹ and other forms of relationship recognition for gay couples are tough issues for many Americans. The good news is that most Americans genuinely want to do the right thing. They're just not sure what that right thing is when it comes to marriage for gay couples. By resolving the conflict they feel, we can help them move from being undecided on an "issue" to being supportive of loving, committed couples.

Doing this requires three approaches. First, we must make an emotional connection and establish that gay couples want to marry for the same reasons as straight couples—namely, to make a lifelong promise to take care of and be responsible for each other. Second, we must illustrate how shutting committed gay couples out of marriage causes real harm by making it hard for them to take care of each other. And third, we must remind Americans that good people care about the well-being of others and oppose putting committed gay couples in harm's way.

Marriage Messages

"Marriage is about commitment. It's about responsibility. And it's about being able to take care of the one you love."

"It's hard to imagine what it would be like to be told that you couldn't visit your husband in the hospital or hold your wife's hand and tell her that you love her before she went into surgery. I think we can all agree that it's wrong to hurt committed gay couples this way."

"Two people in a committed relationship, gay or straight, should be able to take care of and be responsible for each other. Marriage is what allows them to do just that."

"I'm the kind of person who thinks that we should do what we can to help people take care of each other. That's why I support marriage for all committed couples."

Emphasize Common Ground

1) "Marriage is about committed couples who make a lifelong promise to take care of and be responsible for each other." Marriage isn't about "rights." It's about love, commitment, and responsibility. It's about the things we give, not the things we get. It's about our responsibility to the ones we love and the promise and commitment we make to take care of each other. Straight and gay couples want to marry for the same reasons. Both straight and gay couples want to build a life with someone. Both want to make a commitment and a lifelong promise. Both want to take care of and be responsible for each other. And both need the security and legal protections of marriage that help make this possible.

Too often, marriage is discussed as if it's some sort of public policy dispute or a set of "rights" or "benefits" that are being "demanded." Americans don't think about marriage this way. Talk about marriage as people understand and experience it. Help people connect their desire to make a lifelong commitment to someone they love with gay couples who want the same thing.

Illustrate Concrete Harms

2) Denying committed couples the security and legal protections of marriage hurts them; it's wrong to make it harder for committed couples to take care of and be responsible for each other. Marriage confers a set of social and legal protections that helps couples fulfill their lifelong promise to take care of and be responsible

Talking About Marriage and Relationship Recognition

"It's about caring, responsibility, and commitment."

Emphasize common ground

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Illustrate concrete harms

2. Denying committed couples the security and legal protections of marriage hurts them; it's wrong to make it harder for committed couples to take care of and be responsible for each other.

Affirm people's desire to do right

3. Acknowledge people's inner conflict around marriage, but remind them it shouldn't be grounds for hurting committed couples.
4. Talk about the importance of being the type of person who cares about others and who opposes putting committed gay couples in harm's way.

for each other—emotionally, financially, in sickness and in health, and even in death. Denying committed gay couples the ability to marry is wrong because it makes it harder for these couples to take care of each other. We're asking people to stop actively denying or standing in the way of the security and legal protections gay couples need to take care of each other. To do this, we must show exactly how denying marriage (and the important security and protections it provides) puts committed couples in harm's way. Note that Americans who are actively or passively against marriage for gay couples aren't just maintaining the status quo—they're taking an active role in hurting gay couples.

Focus on telling detailed, emotionally involving and compelling stories that connect straight Americans to the routine injustices faced by gay couples. Emergency care-taking issues such as hospital visitation, medical decision making, and leave to take care of an ill partner help people understand the harms that result from the denial of marriage.

Help people see through their own eyes the harm that comes from excluding committed couples from marriage. Instead of telling a straight person, "Imagine if you were gay and you were told you couldn't marry your partner," ask how they would feel if they faced some of the specific injustices that gay couples face (e.g., "Imagine being told you could not see your husband in the hospital. How would that make you feel? That's what many loving, committed gay couples face because they are denied the ability to marry").

REJECTING THE TERMINOLOGY OF ANTI-GAY ACTIVISTS

Using the deceptive terms of anti-gay activists legitimizes their language. One creative way to avoid parroting opponents' terms is to preface them with "so-called." For example, "so-called threats to marriage" or the "so-called Defense of Marriage Act." Using this qualifier challenges opponents' terminology and can make a real difference.

Another way to avoid repeating inaccurate language is to recast it in ways that unmask its true intentions. For example, advocates in Ohio began referring to their DOMA as "the Denial of Marriage Act." This description copied the DOMA acronym, while accurately describing the true purpose of the bill (without falling into the trap of name-calling). Similarly, a so-called "Marriage Protection Act" could be accurately labeled a Marriage Prevention Act.

Affirm People's Desire to Do Right

3) Acknowledge people's inner conflict around marriage, but remind them it shouldn't be grounds for hurting committed couples. When we acknowledge the conflicted feelings of our audience, it helps give them the permission they need to support marriage for gay couples. Why? Because it gives people a chance to support marriage without first having to resolve conflicted feelings or be comfortable with gay couples. For example, say, "This issue can bring up a lot of strong feelings, and it can be an uncomfortable conversation to have. But denying loving, committed gay and lesbian couples the security and legal protections of marriage hurts them, and that's wrong."

4) Talk about the importance of being the type of person who cares about others and opposes putting committed gay couples in harm's way. Many Americans believe we should strive to treat others as we'd like to be treated. Reinforce that people who care about others should support a committed couple's right to visit each other in the hospital and make emergency medical decisions. Caring people should support couples' commitment to be responsible for and take care of each other, in sickness and in health. On the flip side, only an uncaring person would try to bar a loved one from a hospital room or try to prevent a committed couple from making emergency medical decisions for each other.

ABOUT THESE APPROACHES

The *Talking About* series uses two interconnected approaches for discussing LGBT issues. The first approach, **Emphasize Common Ground**, helps reduce the sense of "otherness" that some Americans feel when they think about gay people by focusing on the common values and beliefs that gay and straight Americans share. The second approach, **Illustrate Concrete Harms**, helps people understand and connect with the specific and pervasive injustices that LGBT Americans face.

For additional information, see the *Talking About* document titled **Overall Approaches for LGBT Issues**.

¹ Our approaches for talking about marriage can also be helpful in talking about other forms of relationship recognition, such as domestic partnerships and civil unions. However, only marriage provides committed couples the security and full legal protections they need to take care of each other.

ILLUSTRATING CONCRETE HARMS THROUGH PERSONAL STORIES

One of the crucial parts of any conversation about marriage is helping people understand — in emotionally compelling ways — how the denial of marriage puts committed couples in harm's way. Here are two examples of such stories:

Janice Langbehn and her partner of 18 years, Lisa Pond, were on vacation in Florida when Lisa was stricken by a brain aneurysm and rushed to a local hospital. Because Florida did not recognize their relationship, Janice was barred from seeing Lisa or participating in medical decisions. Even after she had a friend in their home state fax legal documents to the hospital, Janice spent many excruciating hours in the waiting room, not knowing what was happening to Lisa. It wasn't until a priest arrived to give Lisa her last rites, just before her death, that Janice was finally able to see her one last time.

Tim Reardon and his partner, Eric, had been a couple for six years when Eric found out he had a brain tumor. The couple drew up powers of attorney, health care directives, a will, and other documents to protect each other and their family. Yet despite creating as many legal documents as they could, when Eric died, the medical examiner and the cremation society refused to recognize Tim as his next of kin.

The vivid details of such stories — the faxed legal documents, the waiting room, the medical examiner — can help you focus on the need for marriage. If these couples had been able to marry, Janice could have been by Lisa's side during her final hours, and Tim wouldn't have been treated like he and Eric were legal strangers after Eric died. Remind people that marriage provides the essential legal protections that committed couples need to take care of each other in sickness and in health, and it's wrong to deny that to lesbian and gay couples.

Things to Avoid

- 1) DON'T talk about marriage as a "right" or a package of "benefits"** Instead, talk about the security and legal protections of marriage that committed couples need to be able to take care of each other.
- 2) DON'T talk about marriage using abstract numbers** Instead of talking about the 1,138 federal benefits of marriage, focus on language that reflects how people think about their own marriages.
- 3) DON'T use anti-gay opponents' language** (e.g., instead of debating the myth that "gay people are a threat to marriage," stick to the key messages about committed couples taking care of each other).
- 4) DON'T talk about "deserving" or "demanding" marriage** Instead, remind Americans that committed couples need to be able to protect themselves when bad things happen, such as death, disability, or losing a job.
- 5) DON'T descend into name-calling.** Calling anti-gay opponents "bigots," "hateful," or "liars" can alienate your audience, and opponents can exploit such language to accuse LGBT people of intolerance.
- 6) DON'T compare marriage for gay couples to interracial marriage, and don't make comparisons to the African American Civil Rights Movement.** Research is clear: These comparisons alienate African Americans, and they don't help people understand the concrete harms that committed gay couples face when they are excluded from marriage.

Marriage Glossary

We describe marriage as:

- **marriage** (without modifiers; avoid "gay marriage" or "same-sex marriage")
- **marriage for committed couples** (or marriage for gay couples/marriage for gay and lesbian couples, if clarification is needed)

Marriage provides:

- **security, protections, legal protections**
- **committed couples the ability to take care of each other**

Marriage is about:

- **care, caring, love, loving**
- **responsibility, shared/mutual responsibility**
- **commitment, lifelong commitment**
- **lifelong relationship**
- **courage, courageous couples**

The denial of marriage is about:

- **shutting people out of marriage**
- **putting committed couples in harm's way**
- **taking away protections** (can describe efforts to ban relationship recognition for gay couples)
- **making it hard for committed gay couples to take care of and be responsible for each other**

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is one in a series of documents on effectively talking about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues, including: Overall Approaches, Marriage & Relationship Recognition, Inclusive Employment Protections, Inclusive Hate Crimes Laws, Adoption & Gay Parents, and Ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell. For additional information, please email talkingaboutseries@glaad.org. © 2009 Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and Movement Advancement Project.