



## Am I Doing This Right?

John DiLeo © 14 August 2022

I grew up in a rural part of Connecticut, in the northeastern United States. My home town, Plainfield, was small, the population was almost entirely white Europeans, and – as far as those in authority in my life were concerned – *everybody* was cisgendered and straight.

As was the social norm of the time, when someone we knew was gender non-conforming, we were all expected to act as though that fact didn't exist. Our parents referred to their gay and lesbian relatives and acquaintances as 'eccentric,' and to their life partners as 'roommates.'

We were indoctrinated to the "fact" that being cisgendered and straight was the *one true* "lifestyle choice," in much the same way we were indoctrinated to believe our mainstream Christian sect was the *one true* religion.

When I *finally* escaped my hometown, and moved to Baltimore to attend university, my beliefs about what constitutes "normal" were challenged and began to shift gradually. I've considered myself to be a progressive liberal on social issues for at least the last 30 years. I do my best to speak openly and directly against what I perceive as narrow-minded views.

When I became a parent, I knew it was important to teach and show my children they should be respectful of everyone, and make it clear to them there is no such thing as a 'right' or 'wrong' gender or sexuality. We have always addressed their questions openly and honestly, been intentional about not 'shielding' them from non-conforming identities, and made it clear we would love and support them no matter what.

But, as I quickly discovered, all of that was just words. I wasn't really expecting either would take me up on it and, when they *both* did (in different ways), I quickly realised I hadn't ever prepared myself to follow through on those words.

Which brings me to today, sharing with you some of the things I've learned as I'm working through the transition from *saying* I'm an ally to actually *being* an ally. I'm not done, by any means, and I still have a lot to learn.

A key thing I *have* learned so far is that there's no one-size-fits-all way to be an ally to an LGBTQIA – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and/or Asexual – person. Nonetheless, there are lots of resources out there to help us say and do the right things.

One such resource, produced by the LGBTQIA Resource Center at University of California-Davis, lists over 50 “Basic tips for expanding your allyship.” Another, from University College London, boils things down to “7 ways you can be a better LGBTQ+ ally”:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/news/2020/dec/7-ways-you-can-be-better-lgbtq-ally>

1. Be open to learn, listen, and educate yourself - Listen to your friend's personal stories and ask questions respectfully. Take it upon yourself to learn about LGBTQ+ history, terminology, and the struggles that the community still faces today.
2. Check your privilege - Understanding your own privileges can help you empathise with marginalised or oppressed groups.
3. Don't assume - Someone close to you could be looking for support - not making assumptions will give them the space they need to be their authentic self and open up to you in their own time.
4. Think of 'ally' as an action rather than a label - To be an effective ally you need to be willing to be consistent in your support of LGBTQ+ rights and defend LGBTQ+ people against discrimination... It takes all members of society to make true acceptance and respect happen and your open and consistent support will hopefully lead as an example to others.
5. Confront your own prejudices and unconscious bias - Being a better ally means being open to the idea of being wrong sometimes and being willing to work on it.
6. Know that language matters - When meeting new people try integrating inclusive language into your regular conversations by using gender neutral terms such as 'partner' and keep an eye on any unintentionally offensive language you may use everyday.

and, perhaps most importantly:

7. Know that you will mess up sometimes – breathe, apologise, and ask for guidance - Likely, the person you are talking to will know that this process of *unlearning* is new to you and will appreciate your honesty and effort!

In closing, I'd like to ask each of you to ponder what I've said today, reflect on how you're doing as an ally, and strive to improve daily. I also encourage you to think about what we can be doing – individually and collectively – to help this congregation live up to our claim that “all are welcome.”

- Are we considerate and respectful to LGBTQ members?
- Are we careful not to make assumptions about a visitor's gender or sexuality, and to avoid non-inclusive language in our conversations?
- Are we engaging with local LGBTQ community organisations, to learn the best ways we can be vocal, visible, active allies?

In the words of Helen Keller, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”

Let's. Do. Much.

### **Meditation/Conversation Starters:**

- In what way(s) do you feel you've been a good ally to members of the LGBTQIA+ community?
- In what ways(s) do you feel you've fallen short?
- What can we do – individually or as a congregation – to be better allies?