

AN ALLY'S GUIDE TO
TALKING ABOUT



Marriage for Same-Sex Couples



OVERVIEW

Public support for allowing same-sex couples to marry has grown significantly over the past few years, with multiple national polls showing that a majority of Americans now support marriage. This surge in support has followed years of important public and private conversations about marriage and same-sex couples—conversations that have helped move people away from being undecided on an “issue” and toward being supportive of marriage for loving, committed couples. This *Ally’s Guide to Talking About Marriage for Same-Sex Couples* provides a number of approaches that can help move marriage discussions forward.

TALKING ABOUT MARRIAGE

There are three essential approaches for sustaining and building support for marriage. First, we need to ground our conversations in the core values that embody marriage for gay and straight couples alike. Second, we need to help people understand and grapple with how same-sex couples are hurt when they are shut out of marriage. And third, we can remind people of how our shared beliefs—particularly the Golden Rule, freedom, and not sitting in judgment of others—are at the heart of people’s journeys toward supporting marriage.

Emphasize Marriage Values

1. **“Marriage is about loving, committed couples who want to make a lifelong promise to take care of and be responsible for each other, in good times and bad.”** Marriage isn’t about “rights.” It’s about love, commitment and responsibility. It’s about the things we give, not the things we get. Marriage is about the commitment we make to the one we love, and the promise a couple makes to take care of one another. These are the reasons

that both gay couples and straight couples enter into marriage—and why the solemnity of the marriage vow is so important.

Both straight and gay couples want to build a life with someone—to make a commitment to take care of and be responsible for one another. And marriage is how we make that lifelong promise: for better and for worse, in sickness and in health, to love, honor and cherish, always.

Talking about marriage as if it’s a public policy dispute over a set of “rights” can mislead people into believing that same-sex couples want to marry for different reasons than straight couples do. Marriage is about a lifelong promise of love and commitment—and when we talk about what marriage really means, we can help people connect their own desire to make that lifelong promise to someone they love with gay and lesbian couples who want the same thing.

Focus on How Couples Are Hurt

2. **“Denying someone the chance at happiness that comes with being married—just because they’re gay—seems hurtful to me.”** Conversations about marriage are about people. When we focus on how people are hurt when they’re denied the ability to marry the person they love, it makes the harm of denying marriage real—and harder to ignore.

In addition to telling emotionally compelling stories of how same-sex couples are hurt by those who shut them out of marriage, you can help people see through their own eyes the harm that comes from excluding committed couples from marriage. Instead of saying to a straight person, “Imagine if you were gay, and you were told you couldn’t marry your partner,” ask them

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1. Emphasize marriage values.	1. “Marriage is about loving, committed couples who want to make a lifelong promise to take care of and be responsible for each other, in good times and bad.”
2. Focus on how couples are hurt.	2. “Denying someone the chance at happiness that comes with being married—just because they’re gay—seems hurtful to me.”
3. Remind people of our shared beliefs.	3. “I believe in the Golden Rule—in treating others the way I want to be treated. I wouldn’t want anyone to tell me that I couldn’t marry the person I love—and I don’t want to do that to anyone else.”

how they would feel if someone imposed that denial on them. For example, "Imagine that someone told you that you couldn't marry the person you love? How would that make you feel? That's what committed gay and lesbian couples face every day, and that seems hurtful to me."

Remind People of Our Shared Beliefs

3. "I believe in the Golden Rule—in treating others the way I want to be treated. I wouldn't want anyone to tell me that I couldn't marry the person I love, and I don't want to do that to anyone else." Treating others as we would want to be treated is a core value for many Americans. Most people wouldn't want someone to tell them that they shouldn't be allowed to marry, and when they think about it, many say they wouldn't want to deny marriage to anyone else, either.

The principle of not sitting in judgment of others is also important when talking about marriage: "If a couple, gay or straight, is willing to stand up in front of family and friends and make a commitment to grow old with each other and take care of each other in marriage, it's not for me to judge, or to deny them that chance at happiness."

Finally, remind people of our shared belief in freedom: "Marriage is a basic freedom that should not be denied to anyone. In our country, freedom means freedom for everyone."

Talking About the Journey Toward Support

When we look at the changes in public opinion over the past two decades, it's clear that Americans are on a journey toward greater support for gay people and couples. But even some of today's strongest advocates for marriage didn't necessarily start out as marriage supporters.

Many people report experiencing a gradual change of heart when it comes to their support of marriage for same-sex couples. But because the rhetoric against allowing gay couples to marry is so rigid and harsh, people can mistakenly believe that their attitudes and beliefs on this issue can't or shouldn't become more supportive. And as a result, they can feel isolated, alone and stuck.

Stories of those whose attitudes have changed over time can provide a steadying hand on the shoulder of those who are still wrestling with their feelings. Sharing these stories, especially if the journeys are personal ones, can give people permission to embrace their own journey.

Building the Emotional Connection

One of the challenges of talking about marriage for same-sex couples is that many people, from reporters to opponents, will try to position marriage as if it's a policy problem or a point of conflict. But that isn't how most Americans think about marriage.

When you talk about marriage, speak from the heart. Talk about why marriage matters to you, and why you wouldn't want to deny marriage to anyone else.

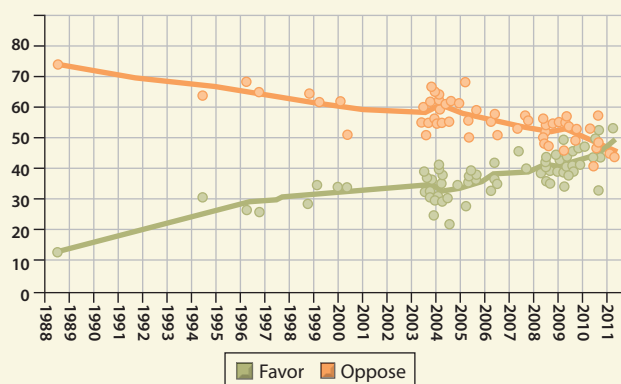
Maybe it's about what made you fall in love with the person you're spending your life with. Maybe it's about your dream of finding that one special person to make that commitment to. Or maybe it's about the dream of a loved one who wants more than anything to stand in front of family and friends and make that marriage promise to be there always for the person they love—for better and for worse.

Building support for marriage isn't about debating or arguing about "rights." It's about helping your audience connect, or reconnect, with what it feels like to find and have that special someone. And it's about evoking the values that are at the heart of why couples—gay and straight alike—make the lifelong promise of marriage.

Public Opinion on Marriage

According to a 2011 analysis of marriage polls since 1988, Americans are moving to become supportive of marriage at an accelerating rate. Reminding your audience that a majority of Americans now support marriage can give them permission to join that majority.

Support for Marriage, 1988-2011



Reprinted with permission from Nate Silver, "Gay Marriage Opponents Now in Minority," FiveThirtyEight (NYTimes.com blog), April 20, 2011.

When Opponents Try to Change the Subject

Numerous polls show that a majority of Americans now support marriage. As a result, anti-gay activists now want to change the subject. For example, they try to distract people by saying that allowing same-sex couples to marry will affect school curriculum, or by claiming that churches will be forced to marry same-sex couples. And once a marriage supporter is lured into thinking about the fears manufactured by anti-gay activists, it can be difficult to bring the conversation back to marriage.

Don't be drawn into debating opponents' fear-based strategies. Instead, keep the conversation focused on why marriage matters—to you, and to the people you know and love.

If you need to dispense with the claims of anti-gay opponents, do so quickly and positively—and bring the conversation immediately back to marriage. For example, “Legal marriage for same-sex couples does not affect the right of churches to decide who they will marry. If a couple is willing to stand up in front of family and friends and make that commitment to each other in marriage, it's not for me to judge, or to deny them that chance at happiness.”

THINGS TO AVOID

1. **DON'T talk about marriage as a “right” or as a package of “benefits.”** While marriage provides important legal protections that allow committed couples to take care of each other, marriage is also about much more than that. Focus on language that reflects how people think about their own marriages, and how we shouldn't hurt loving, committed couples by denying them the chance of happiness in marriage.
2. **DON'T use anti-gay opponents' language.** For example, instead of debating the false myth that gay people are a “threat to marriage,” talk about shared values that marriage embodies: love, commitment, and the lifelong promise to take care of the one you love.
3. **DON'T descend into name-calling.** Calling anti-gay opponents “bigots” or “hateful” alienates those who are honestly wrestling with the subject. Using measured, relatable language does more to create empathy and a sense of how opponents are hurting same-sex couples.

Terminology: Talking About Marriage

Below are a few terms you can use when talking about marriage. For additional terminology resources, visit *An Ally's Guide to Terminology: Talking About LGBT People & Equality* at lgbtmap.org/terminologyguide.

General Terms

- Talk about **marriage**, without modifiers. Avoid terms like “gay marriage” and “same-sex marriage”; say *marriage for all committed couples* or *marriage for same-sex couples* if clarification is needed.
- Talk about the **denial of marriage** (also *exclusion from marriage* and *shutting couples out of marriage*) when discussing and illustrating how gay couples are hurt.
- Be careful when using the term “marriage equality.” While it can be helpful when talking to those who are already strongly supportive, it can create confusion and barriers to understanding for other audiences.

Marriage Values

- love
- commitment
- responsibility
- a lifelong promise
- taking care of the one you love

Shared Beliefs

- the Golden Rule, treating others as you would want to be treated
- loving your neighbor
- being the kind of person who doesn't deny someone the chance of happiness in marriage
- protecting the freedoms of all committed couples

4. **DON'T make comparisons to interracial marriage or to the African American Civil Rights Movement.** These comparisons alienate African Americans, and they don't help people understand how same-sex couples are hurt when they are shut out of marriage.

For more marriage resources, visit WhyMarriageMatters.org.



ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is one in a series of documents on effectively talking about LGBT issues, also including: Overall Approaches, Inclusive Employment Protections, Inclusive Hate Crimes Laws, Adoption & Gay Parents, Suicide & LGBT Populations, Ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Talking About LGBT Equality with African Americans, Talking About LGBT Equality with Latinos & Hispanics, an Ally's Guide to Talking About Transgender-Inclusive Non-Discrimination Laws, and an Ally's Guide to Terminology. For downloadable versions, visit www.lgbtmap.org/talking-about-lgbt-issues-series or www.glaad.org/talkingabout. © 2012 Movement Advancement Project (MAP).

