

Surviving and Thriving in the Midst of Anti-Gay Politics

by Glenda M. Russell, Ph.D.

A social worker in Missouri sent an e-mail about a research project, and in it he mentioned the possibility of a constitutional amendment against same-sex marriage. He described driving home with his partner after work and telling him the latest news on the subject: “I told Rick ... and we ended up in this frustrating, upset, angry conversation about the whole thing that temporarily ruined what had been a good mood. It just hurts that such a large segment of the population doesn’t see the wonder and the joy and the support in our relationships, and we have to fight for what they take for granted.”

This man’s and his partner’s experience is being played out across this country. In cities large and small, in towns, suburbs, and rural areas, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals are confronted with the debate about same-sex marriage. For some people, the debate occurs very close to home, in the midst of legislative or electoral efforts in their own state to prohibit marriage

between two women or between two men. Other LGBT people live in places that are not directly affected—at least not yet—by the politics of the issue. For these people, prohibitions against same-sex marriage loom as a possibility at the federal level rather than at the level of their states. In each case, LGBT Americans, even those who do not view same-sex marriage as an issue of personal importance, are being exposed to demoralizing arguments and dehumanizing rhetoric.¹

All of these discussions, whether they occur in formal legislative and judicial settings, in the media, or in everyday conversation, may contribute to psychological and social damage for LGBT individuals. There are concrete steps that LGBT people can take to bolster their psychological resistance to the stress associated with these debates. This issue of *Angles* describes what research tells us about the stresses of anti-gay politics and the tools for resilience that LGBT people can mobilize in the face of anti-gay politics.

The Stressful Effects of Anti-Gay Politics

Most of the research on the psychological effects of anti-gay politics has focused on the impact on LGBT people. More limited research conducted on heterosexual allies suggests that they sometimes have the same or similar responses as LGBT people.² Not all LGBT people (or heterosexual allies) will react in the same way to these situations. But all LGBT people and their allies would do well to consider the possibility that they will be affected by the anti-gay climate. Research has suggested five prominent reactions: encounter with homophobia, fear, sadness, anger, and internalized homophobia. Below I examine each and suggest ways to respond to these reactions.

Encounter with Homophobia

Most LGBT people make efforts to create a comfortable life that insulates them from the most obvious and harshest forms of homophobia. Being in the middle of anti-gay political campaigns forces LGBT people to acknowledge and confront the fact that homophobia is 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 that homophobia had totally disappeared or that they were beyond being affected by homophobia.

Fear

Encounters with the homophobia associated with anti-gay politics may understandably lead to fearfulness on the part of LGBT people.³ The fear may take many forms: fear of physical assault, of

being outed, of rejection, of discrimination, of isolation, and many others. This fear needs to be acknowledged, understood, and managed; LGBT people should recognize that fear under such circumstances is reasonable. 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 can evoke feelings of sadness. It is sad when the world feels unsafe and when people, especially familiar people, act in ways that are uncaring or even rejecting.⁴ Therefore, LGBT people who are exposed to anti-gay politics might feel lonely and isolated. When sadness strikes for any reason, it is a signal that some sort of loss has occurred. In the case of anti-gay politics, the sadness may represent a wide variety of possible losses: of innocence, of security, of a sense of safety, of positive and even idealized views of people, or of self-esteem. All losses signal the need for comfort, and this is no different. In some cases, losses can be regained—for example, when someone grieves for unanticipated disruptions to her friendship network

due to anti-gay politics, and then moves into solidifying remaining friendships. Some losses—for example, the loss of innocence—are very difficult to regain. Such losses require grieving, preferably with the support of caring others, and then moving on.

Anger

The story at the beginning of this article conveys the anger that LGBT people sometimes feel when they encounter anti-gay rhet-

*Anti-Gay Politics: Conditions for Stress for LGBT People**

- LGBT people are the focus of a “culture war”
- LGBT people are one of the targets of a “culture war”
- LGBT people are treated as objects of debate and their lives are subject to analysis
- Homophobic and heterosexist ideas are reinforced
- Old stereotypes are revived
- Anti-gay rhetoric and pseudo-research abound
- LGBT people feel under siege

* Russell, G. M. (2004). The dangers of a same-sex referendum for community and individual well-being: A summary of research findings. www.igloss.org

oric and behavior. They 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 weary of being the object of debate. Anger is an understandable reaction to such violations.⁵

Anger can be useful if a person translates it into some sort of productive action—such as personal or social change or political action. Sometimes LGBT people simply need to express the anger over anti-gay grievances in some direct way: telling a friend, writing a letter to the editor or an elected official, writing in a journal, working out, finding a pleasurable distraction, or 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 to a broadly cynical stance.

Internalized Homophobia

As mentioned earlier, anti-gay campaigns give rise to all manner of negative messages about LGBT people. It is very difficult, if not impossible, for LGBT people to be exposed to this rhetoric over an extended period of time and not absorb some of it. When that happens, people may question themselves more, may have more negative thoughts about their sexual identities, and may experience reduced self-esteem—a combination of factors often grouped under the heading “internalized homophobia.”⁶ Another possible side effect of internalized homophobia is the devaluation of other LGBT people or of the LGBT community in general.

The more LGBT people are aware that they have absorbed anti-gay messages, the easier it is for them to undo them. It does not help to criticize oneself (or others) for having internalized some of the homophobic messages that float so freely around anti-gay campaigns. This process of absorbing anti-gay messages should be taken as a given, and energy is bet-

ter 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-gay campaigns. Many people have found it very useful to spend lots of time in supportive venues within the LGBT community, where they encounter real people rather than the myths, half-truths, and lies that make up much of the anti-gay campaign rhetoric. It also helps to keep

in mind that there are huge variations among LGBT 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.

Strategies for Surviving Anti-Gay Politics

Clearly anti-gay politics can exert significant psychological pressure on LGBT people and their communities. But LGBT people can draw on multiple resources to enhance their ability to cope in the face of anti-gay politics. In fact, LGBT people often emerge from such experiences with new knowledge, commitment, and higher self-esteem.⁷ These changes are due not directly to the anti-gay politics but rather to gay people’s ability to confront anti-gay experiences while drawing on a number of rich sources of support. Gay people confronting anti-gay politics are advised to tend to themselves in the usual healthful ways: adequate diet, exercise, rest, and the like. In addition, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people have contributed their insights about specific factors that have helped them to survive the unique stresses associated with anti-gay politics. These sources of resilience can be summarized as the *Three As*: Analysis, Action, and Allies.

(1) Analysis of Homophobia

One of the most useful perspectives for LGBT people facing anti-gay politics is to recognize the political reality of homophobia. It is critical to understand homophobia as a form of social oppression rather than as a phenomenon that targets one personally. This social and political view of oppression provides some insulation against the anti-gay rhetoric that is so prominent in campaigns to limit LGBT civil rights. In addition, thinking through their experience also helps LGBT people to connect their internal struggles with homophobia to the external world. Seeing homophobia as a larger social process helps LGBT people to understand how much

they have in common with other LGBT people and, therefore, to recognize the value of collective action.

Turning our view of homophobia around is the flip side of the stress generated by anti-gay attitudes. Recognition creates new possibilities, as one 42-year-old Hispanic man described after his encounter with the anti-gay Amendment 2 in Colorado:

“Although I have become cognizant of the bigotry, I have also become so much more aware of my own inner strength. I feel that perhaps the passing of Amendment 2 may in the long run work in our favor—it symbolizes a renewed opportunity for all Americans to do battle against all bigotry, but it also symbolizes

What LGBT Organizations Can Do to Foster Resistance to the Psychological Consequences of Anti-Gay Politics

- Include a political analysis of homophobia in all orientations and volunteer trainings, and connect the political analysis to what your organization does.
- Acknowledge that internalized homophobia is a fact of life. Encourage everyone to discuss internalized homophobia rather than to hide it in themselves or attack it in others.
- Exercise restraint in blanket criticism of other LGBT groups.
- Recruit heterosexual allies and place some allies in visible positions in your organization.
- Offer LGBT people outlets for activism at different levels of intensity: behind the scenes as well as very public.
- Make connections among different forms of oppression, being careful to recognize differences among them as well.
- Provide support when people are fearful, including forums for relaxation, recreation, self-defense strategies, and general support.
- Provide outlets for people when they are angry: forms and addresses for letters to the editor, opportunities for collaborative art pieces, gripe sessions.
- Acknowledge that individuals and the organization can benefit when paid staff and volunteers take care of themselves, taking periodic breaks from high-intensity activities.
- Label homophobia for what it is. Invite participants to generate political analyses of current events impacting the LGBT community.
- Allow people time and space for grieving their losses.
- Make it possible for people to plug into the organization easily and quickly.
- Sponsor public gatherings to acknowledge setbacks and to celebrate victories.
- Offer periodic statements on the campaign to staff and volunteers.
- Make available materials that counter anti-gay rhetoric for your staff and volunteers as well as for the general public.
- Make sure your organization spends some time and energy creating positive culture rather than devoting all of its time and energy to countering negative forces.
- Invite an LGBT or LGBT-friendly chorus to sing for your staff and volunteers.
- Allow yourselves and encourage others to be joyful. Joy is a revolutionary act.

an opportunity for us gays and lesbians to destroy the stereotypes by coming out and speaking against all infractions to civil rights, not just those that are convenient for us.”

This sort of perspective allows LGBT people to resist internalized homophobia and to see anti-gay campaigns as part of a larger movement, one that extends across different places and even across different times. This perspective increases the possibility that personal experiences will be transformed to collective voices. LGBT people can translate their encounter with homophobia into various forms of direct action: coming out, getting involved in the community, and doing political work.

(2) Action

A number of observers have pointed out that anti-gay political fights tend to galvanize LGBT communities.⁸ One observer identified four ways that public debates over LGBT rights can serve LGBT communities: by increasing media visibility, by giving LGBT people a forum for countering anti-gay rhetoric, by offering LGBT people an opportunity to exercise free expression, and by giving LGBT people a chance to make new information available to the public.⁹ When LGBT people respond to anti-gay oppression by building and strengthening their communities, they can accomplish a number of important ends, including

Things That Help

- Allow yourself time to grieve, and then move on.
- Notice the strength and courage of LGBT people who have fought for and continue to fight for their rights.
- If you belong to a faith tradition or community, make use of it for spiritual and emotional support during this time.
- Channel your anger into productive activities.
- Allow yourself to spend time in LGBT-friendly spaces.
- Create LGBT-friendly spaces for others.
- Participate in LGBT culture: rent an LGBT-themed video, read an LGBT magazine, sing in an LGBT chorus, attend cultural events, create cultural events.
- Take another step in the process of coming out.
- Use this as an opportunity to look at the negative messages about LGBT people that you have taken in. Examine them and let them go.
- Understand how homophobia has impacted you at personal and political levels.
- Talk with other LGBT people about homophobic campaign messages and learn how homophobia works.
- Figure out the ways you are comfortable taking a stand, and then push yourself a bit beyond these.
- Be aware of areas where you have privilege (by virtue of skin color, sex, ability, education, etc.) and use that privilege to foster positive change in the world.
- Use your experiences with homophobia to help teach yourself about other forms of oppression.
- Learn what you can about other movements for social change.
- Understand parallels and differences between the LGBT rights movement and other rights movements.
- Notice the number of heterosexuals who care about the issue and are on the side of justice.
- Spend time talking with heterosexuals who want to be allies.
- Work on a project with other LGBT people and supportive allies.
- Develop and keep a perspective that recognizes that the movement for LGBT rights is an ongoing process that inevitably has both defeats and victories
- Look at how much the LGBT movement has changed and what it has accomplished in a relatively short time.

developing their political analysis and their political skills; increasing self-knowledge and self-empowerment; and decreasing isolation, internalized homophobia, and a sense of powerlessness.¹⁰

Many LGBT people use their experiences with anti-gay politics as a springboard for political activism. One of the most obvious and widespread responses to anti-gay campaigns has been for LGBT people to come out.¹¹ Their doing so has resulted in significant changes at the community level (increased visibility, more varied and accurate representations of LGBT people, less isolation for other LGBT people, etc.) and at the individual level (less energy dedicated to secrecy and hiding, a sense of empowerment, enhanced ability to engage in collective action, etc.).

(3) *Allies*

A final, often neglected factor that can promote resilience for LGBT people is the visibility of heterosexuals who take public stands in support of LGBT rights. Clearly, heterosexual allies are important for their work in the political arena. They also

act as significant sources of social and psychological support for LGBT people. The presence of active allies can counter the sense of isolation and powerlessness that LGBT people sometimes experience when they are under political threat.¹² This factor suggests that LGBT people are well-advised to make a point of noticing the presence of heterosexual allies rather than focusing all their attention on heterosexuals who oppose LGBT rights. This factor should also remind heterosexual allies of an important effect of their actions: in addition to whatever concrete support they may give on behalf of LGBT rights, their very presence often results in a psychological benefit for LGBT people.

The time may come when political attacks on the LGBT community disappear. Until that time, we must take care of ourselves as individuals and as a community when we encounter anti-gay efforts in the political sphere. Research from LGBT people has helped to identify the reactions associated with anti-gay politics; research has also identified the steps we can take to take care of ourselves and one another. ■

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About the Author

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Related Workshops:

Dr. Russell is available to lead workshops for community organizations, mental health centers, student groups, or other groups. The workshop is based on the research summarized in this issue and will teach participants skills and strategies for surviving anti-gay political campaigns. Please contact Dr. Russell at russell@iglss.org for more information.

Notes

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- ⁵ Russell (2000). Ibid. Russell & Richards (2003). Ibid.
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- ¹² Russell (2000). Ibid.

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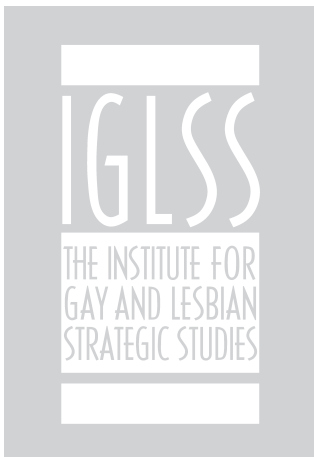


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