

Responding to the Tragedy in Orlando

What took place in Orlando on the morning of June 12 was a hate crime and an act of terror. In one sense, hate crimes are always acts of terror: Hate crimes victimize not only the individual or individuals who were directly impacted but also the communities of which those individuals are members. Feeling a certain level of confusion is a frequent part of being in a community that has been impacted by a hate crime. It is critical that we call the event what it is: a hate crime. Having strong reactions to such events makes sense. These reactions are not pathological, and it is likely that many other people share them.

What we feel is not about a personal weakness; this is about a community and political experience that may be felt on a deeply personal level. It is a collective experience, and collective problems are best solved through collective means. This event, despite its horror, will not stop the movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer rights. It is important for us to keep that in mind and to call upon the strengths we have built as a community as we move forward. Here is what we know can help based on over two decades of research.

Helpful Responses for LGBTQ People

- Cultivate a “movement perspective.”

This horrible moment is part of what sometimes happens when people insist on their rights.

We are part of a community that extends across time and place, in this nation and beyond.

We are also connected to other movements for equality. We must keep this in mind and resist the temptation to see one person in another stigmatized group (the shooter) as representing all members of that group (Muslims, people of color, etc.). We all benefit from seeing the broader movement for equality as a struggle we all share.

It does not mean the movement is ending or even in trouble. The event in Orlando is part of a bigger backlash.

The movement will go forward despite such events, though that may not feel possible now.

We have the power to make that happen. It requires us to work, but is there any more important thing to do with our energies?

- Do something.

Active coping is virtually always better than doing nothing.

Read a book on queer history.

Think of 10 good things about being LGBTQ.

Express your sadness, anger, and fear or whatever you're feeling.

Get your friends together to talk about this event.

Resist the temptation to reduce the Orlando tragedy to a matter of mental illness. Research shows that people with diagnosed mental illnesses are no more likely to commit violent acts than people without such diagnoses.

Send money to your local LGBTQ community center.

Volunteer with a community organization.

Attend a Pride parade in your city.

Go to a queer chorus concert.

- Pay attention to your allies.

When danger is afoot, it is tempting to focus exclusively on possible sources of danger. While it is important to be as safe as possible, it is also important to focus on who your allies are.

Movements rarely make progress solely through the efforts of people who are the targets of oppression. We need allies.

Learn about what you want from allies by working to be a better ally.

Be aware of the impact of multiple, intersecting identities on victimization. For instance, people of color are disproportionately targets of anti-LGBTQ hate crimes, including the one in Orlando.

Pay at least as much attention to our allies as you do to the people who are against us.

Tell your straight and cis friends what you would like them to do.

Hold yourself accountable for being an ally to oppressed groups of which you are not a member—including Muslims. This helps you to be aware of your privilege—which, in Suzanne Pharr's words—you can "spend well." You'll feel less powerless, and you can create positive change in the world.

- Watch for the negative messages about our community that may float around.

Actively resist such messages.

Learn the truth about who we are.

Read some LGBTQ history to remind yourself of what an amazing movement we have.

Read about LGBTQ elders and what they have accomplished.

Take note of the remarkable strength, courage, and creativity of so many LGBTQ youths.

Remember and heed the words of the great South African freedom fighter, Steven Biko, who said, "The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."

- Find and make use of your LGBT and allied community.

Go where you feel safe. Play when you feel like it.

You'll be contributing to the community even as you get good things from the community.

Support community events.

Use the Orlando tragedy as a way to re-energize yourself and your local community.

Have hot sex, and play safe.

Look at everything you have gained from the LGBTQ community, and dare to pass it on to others.

- Do the usual things that help people, especially in times of crisis.

Take care of yourself.

Get enough sleep.

Eat well.

Be careful what you put into your body.

Get some exercise.

Pay attention to the temptation to isolate.

If You Are a Mental Health Professional:

- Share your knowledge and skills with others.
- Help our communities to know the truth about our lives.
- Be willing to talk with your clients about their reactions to Orlando.
- Teach your students about privilege and oppression.
- Show others that being LGBT or Q is a gift.

For more information, visit www.drglendarussell.com

See especially "Psychological Impact of Anti-LGBT Actions" under the "Downloadables" tab.

For comments or questions, contact Glenda Russell, Ph.D.

Phone: 303-447-9600; e-mail: gmrussell5@hotmail.com