

The GLSEN **Jump-Start** Guide

PART
5



Examining
Power,
Privilege
and
Oppression

GLSEN®

GAY, LESBIAN & STRAIGHT
EDUCATION NETWORK

The GLSEN Jump-Start Guide

WELCOME!

Welcome to *The GLSEN Jump-Start Guide*! GLSEN's student organizing team has created this resource to support new and established Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) and similar groups that are working to make schools safer and more inclusive for all students. We've been hearing from many organizers that they need concrete ideas for building, shaping and activating their groups, and that's what this guide is all about. It takes you through the process of establishing your student club, identifying your mission and goals, assessing your school's climate, and engaging in projects and activities throughout the year. It also offers resources for further exploration.

This guide consists of eight self-contained sections; all are designed to help you *jump-start*—or bring fresh and creative energy to—your student club. Topics include:

- Building and Activating Your GSA
- Tips and Tools for Organizing an Action Campaign
- Strategies for Training Teachers
- Understanding Direct-Action Organizing
- Examining Power, Privilege and Oppression
- Creating Youth-Adult Partnerships
- Making Your Student Club Trans-Inclusive
- Evaluation, Continuation, Celebration!

Please note that we have chosen to use gender-neutral language in this resource. We recognize that replacing “he” and “she” with the gender-neutral “they” is grammatically questionable, but we hope you will overlook this in support of students who do not use “he” or “she” to identify themselves.

If you would like to receive more information about GLSEN, or to get involved in the safer schools movement, please register online at www.studentorganizing.org! We welcome your feedback on the activities in this guide—and we salute you for the important work you are doing to create safer schools for all regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

Examining Power, Privilege and Oppression

The GLSEN Jump-Start Guide

Contents

Overview	What Does “Anti-Oppression” Mean?	1
Activity 5.1	Exploring Identity and Identity Shields	2
Activity 5.2	Exploring Power and Privilege	4
Activity 5.3	Prejudice, “Isms” and Oppression	7
Activity 5.4	Oppression Circles	10
Activity 5.5	Placing the Isms	12
Activity 5.6	Anti-Oppression Work	14
Activity 5.7	Being an Ally	15

Examining Power, Privilege and Oppression

What Does “Anti-Oppression” Mean?

Making connections

among different struggles is at the **heart** of anti-oppression work

Is anti-LGBT sentiment the only thing that hurts others and contributes to making schools unsafe for many students? Are there other ways that inequalities in society cause harmful situations for students?

When we talk about these inequalities, we often talk about **oppression**—a pattern or system of inequality that gives power and privileges to members of one group of people at the expense of another. Working in an anti-oppression framework involves making your views of the world large enough to include everyone—looking for ways to make connections among different people’s struggles and finding ways to think about how issues affect different people in different ways.

Think of the issue of safer schools, or any other issue, like a photograph. When it’s first developing, you might see the things you recognize and get a general picture of what’s happening.

But sometimes, when we develop the picture, we find details that we wouldn’t have seen if we didn’t look more closely. What do you notice about anti-LGBT bullying in schools? Who’s doing it? Who else gets bullied, and why? Who else faces discrimination or bias for their personal characteristics? Do people besides LGBT students in your school have issues that could use more attention? Are there systems set up that make it hard to achieve safer schools for all, and do these systems affect people besides LGBT students? **These are questions you might want to ask yourself to see what details there are in the picture of safer schools.**

The more details we uncover, **the more people we tend to notice in the background and in other parts of the picture.** So, to do good activism and other work with the safer schools movement, we have to include all the people and issues we see in this picture. Working in an anti-oppressive framework means seeing this photograph with all its details and **including all people’s views and concerns as important. Only then can we make schools safe for all people.**

Seeing the safer schools movement in this way is a great step to making change on the huge scale that we need to. Using an anti-oppressive framework, people are more equipped to recognize the connections and relationships among different forms of oppression—and more motivated to work together to put an end to all oppressions.



Exploring **Identity** and **Identity Shields**

How do the
different parts
of your
identity
give you
power?

Ready... A person's **identity** is a group of characteristics that make up who they are. A **characteristic** is a distinguishing feature or quality, such as being a person of color, a book lover, a sibling or a swimmer. Each person's identity is unique and special because it is made up of different characteristics. Although people may share characteristics, no two identities are exactly the same.

Set... **People:** Entire group, prepared facilitator

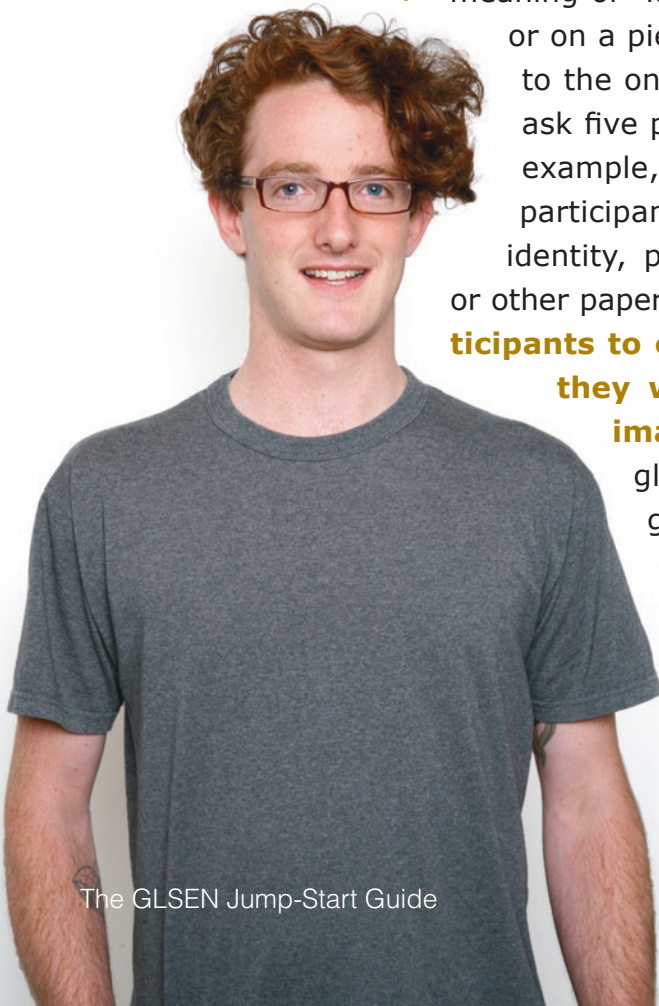
Tools: Markers, paper, magazines (optional), scissors, glue

Time: 45 minutes

GO! Understanding the many aspects of your own identity, along with the identities of your fellow student club members, is one strategy to more fully appreciate the power of individuals and of the group. Since we know that no two identities are alike, we want to give everyone in the group a chance to create their own "identity shield."

Start this activity by asking the group to focus on the concept of identity. Invite participants to share their thoughts on the meaning of "identity," and create a working definition on the board or on a piece of flip-chart paper. Compare the group's definition to the one provided in the Ready section of this activity. Next, ask five participants to name aspects of their own identity (for example, runner, tall, transgender, daughter and so on). Once participants have an idea of the different parts of a person's identity, pass out one piece of construction paper (cardboard or other paper can also be used) to everyone in the group. **Ask participants to create their own "identity shields" in any shape they want, using words, phrases (even quotes) and images.** Markers, magazines, other construction paper, glitter, origami paper and glue are also a great way to get people involved.

Once participants have finished creating their identity shields, have them form small groups of 3 to 5 members. Ask them to go around in a circle and share words and pictures that portray various aspects of their identity. Remind participants to listen respectfully as group members explain elements that appear on their identity shields.



Exploring **Identity** and **Identity Shields** (continued)

After everyone has had a chance to share within the small groups, **bring participants back together for a large-group discussion about their own identity.** You may want to use the following questions to help guide discussion:

- ⇒ Where do identities come from?
- ⇒ How do the different parts of your identity give you power?
- ⇒ How is your identity different from the ways people might perceive you?
- ⇒ Which aspects of your identity are easily visible to others? Which aspects are less visible?
- ⇒ In what ways is your identity made up of more than one layer? What are some of these layers?
- ⇒ Which aspects of your identity are easiest to share in school and/or in your student club? Why do you think this is the case?

Explain to participants that these shields are for them to keep, and remind them of their multi-layered identity. Also, make sure participants know that they can add to these shields at any time to reflect the fact that a person's identity is always changing.

Exploring Power and Privilege

Privilege

often gives
a person
or group
power

Ready... What is power?

A good definition of "power" is "the ability to get what you want." Groups and individuals both pursue and exert power. On an individual level, people find power within themselves in different ways; what makes one person feel powerful may not make someone else feel the same way. For example, one person might find power in being tall, while another person might feel that being tall diminishes their ability to get what they want.

What is privilege?

Privilege is a special advantage or right that a person is born into or acquires during their lifetime. Privilege is not available to everyone in society. Privilege and power are closely related: Privilege often gives a person or group power over others.

Set... **People:** Entire group, facilitator

Tools: Four pieces of flip-chart paper, blank paper, Post-it notes

Time: 45 minutes

GO! Ask the group what the word "power" means to them.

Encourage participants to take a moment to really think about this question before answering. As they do this, write the word "power" at the top of a piece of flip-chart paper and record participants' responses on the flip-chart. After the brainstorm, share the definition from above—which is widely used in community organizing—and compare it to the ideas on power that the group has generated. Before moving on to the next step, ask participants: "How does power fit into a discussion or activity on anti-oppression?"

Give participants a stack of Post-it notes and ask them to write answers to the question, "What gives you power?" You may want to refer to Activity 5.1, "Exploring Identity and Identity Shields," if your student club has already completed it. Then take one of the pieces of flip-chart paper and write "What Gives Us Power" at the top. Ask participants to read the notes they have written on what gives them power. Have two volunteers group the Post-its by similarities.



Exploring Power and Privilege (continued)

Once everyone has shared, have participants break into small groups of 3 to 5 members. Use the following questions, or create your own, to generate a small-group discussion:

- ⇒ In what ways and from what sources do people get power?
- ⇒ What are some examples of power that comes from **external sources** (power from outside of one's self) and from **internal sources** (finding power within oneself)?

- ⇒ Do some people get power from both internal and external sources? Explain.
- ⇒ Within your group, what were the most common responses to the question of what gives people power?



Once the small-group discussions are done, bring everyone back together in a large group and ask, "What does the word 'privilege' mean?" Create a working definition for the word "privilege," making sure that all participants have a chance to share their thoughts. Next pass out a sheet of paper to every participant and explain that they are going to create their own personal "privilege web." To do this, write the word "privilege" in

the middle, circle the word, and then create a web of responses or other ideas around it. Ask the group to write in its web "Ways That We Have Privilege in Our Society." Make it clear that if participants are not comfortable with their responses, they will not have to share their web with the group. Remind them that there are many different sources of privilege in our society—including speaking the English language, being able-bodied, being male and so on.

Ask participants to share their webs. Remind everyone that they have the option to pass. You may also feel more comfortable collecting all the webs and giving a five-minute break during which the group leaves the room while you post the webs anonymously on the wall for a "gallery walk" that gives participants a chance to walk quietly around the room and view everyone's webs. (If you choose to do the "gallery walk," let participants know ahead of time.) Once everyone who wants to has shared, discuss the following questions with the group:

Exploring Power and Privilege (continued)

- ⇒ In what situations and contexts are you most aware of your own privilege?
- ⇒ In what situations and contexts are you most aware of your own power?
- ⇒ What is the difference between privilege and power?
- ⇒ Whether consciously or unconsciously, how have you used your privilege, both as an individual and as a member of various groups?
- ⇒ How do you acknowledge that you have privilege or that you don't have privilege?
- ⇒ How do you feel talking about power and privilege? Why?

prejudice, “Isms” and Oppression

Oppression

is based on

**power and
privilege—**

while

prejudice

is based on

stereotypes

Ready... Now that the members of your group have a better understanding of privilege and power, it’s time to take a closer look at prejudice, “isms” and oppression.

What is prejudice?

Prejudice is an attitude or belief about another person or group that is based on stereotypes instead of on experience or reason.

When thinking about prejudice, it’s important to remember that power is not involved with the definition or with the act of being prejudiced. A woman—who in our society does not have as much power as a man—can be prejudiced against men. She may, for example, think that all men are weak. We know that this is not a true statement; this is one woman’s prejudiced belief about men. If we reverse that situation and think about a man who believes all women were weak, that would be sexism. Let’s look a little more closely at why this is sexism by understanding what an “ism” is.

What are “isms”?

“Isms” are prejudiced beliefs, behaviors and institutional practices by a group or a person with power directed against specific groups of people.

Sexism is one example of this phenomenon. Men in our society have more privilege than women. In schools today, men’s sports often get more funding than women’s sports. Men often make more money than women who do the same job. If a man is a political figure, the media often focuses on his opinions, while if a woman is a political figure, the media often comments on her clothing, hair or smile. Each of these is a form of sexism.

Prejudice + Power = sexism, racism, or other “isms”

What is oppression?

Oppression is a pattern or system of inequality that gives power and privileges to members of one group of people at the expense of another.

This activity is intended to help group members understand the connections and differences between prejudice and oppression. Before you start, have the definitions of *power*, *privilege*, *oppression*, *prejudice* and “isms” written on flip-chart paper and readily accessible for participants.



Prejudice, "Isms" and Oppression (continued)

Set... **People:** Entire group, prepared facilitator(s)

Tools: Flip-chart paper, scrap paper, pens

Time: 15 minutes

GO! In a large group, ask participants to think about what the words "prejudice" and "oppression" mean. Offer a piece of paper and pen to any student who would like to write their ideas down. After giving participants a few minutes, bring them back together and create working definitions of "oppression" and "prejudice." Make sure that the word "power" is included in the definition of "oppression" and discuss why it is so important to include it. Once you have created working definitions, check back to make sure that they fit with the definitions presented above. (If the group's definitions need to be modified, discuss this and come to an understanding of why certain points need to be included in the definitions.)

Once you have completed the working definitions, **ask each participant to write down one example of oppression, as well as one prejudiced belief they were raised with and how they came to believe that idea.** Break into small groups and ask participants to share their examples and beliefs. Remind participants that this is a safe space and that this may be a challenging activity because people may feel guilty for some of the privileges that they have. It is important to stress that guilt is not productive but that it is a common reaction as people come to terms with their privileges. Beyond feeling guilty, we must recognize our ability to do something to ensure that we do not use our privilege over others.

After returning to the large group, brainstorm possible definitions for the term "ism." Remember, we are not talking about types of "isms"; we are just looking for a working definition. It is important that the word "power" be included in this definition. In creating a working definition for the term "ism," compare it to the definition above and make sure that all elements of the definitions match. Use the definition of "isms" to better understand how oppression takes place. Make a list of all of the "isms" the group can think of, and define each "ism" as it is brought up.

Next, ask the group to brainstorm examples of each of the "isms" you have come up with. Write these on flip-chart paper. **Carefully go through all the examples and ask the group who has the power in each of the "isms" and in each of their examples.** Once a full understanding of the power dynamic has occurred, ask participants what the difference is between a person being prejudiced and being racist.

Privilege is:

Being male
Being white
Being wealthy
Being able-bodied
Being a U.S. citizen
(This is not a complete list of privileges people can have in our society.)

Prejudice is:

A woman believing that all men are sexist.
A person of color thinking that all white people are rich.
A wealthy person thinking all poor people are lazy.

Prejudice, “Isms” and Oppression (continued)

Examples of “isms”

Ageism
Sexism
Heterosexism
Classism
Ableism
Racism
Faithism
Genderism
Anti-Semitism

This would be a good time to discuss the notion of reverse “isms.” Some people believe that reverse sexism or racism can occur; but it is essential to remember that *one must have power to oppress someone else*. Discuss this concept with the group and ask participants to explain why reverse sexism or racism cannot exist.

Conclude the activity by addressing the idea of power dynamics in our society. This concept may be new for group members, so be prepared to answer a lot of questions. (It is also important for facilitators to be honest with the group about their experiences regarding these sensitive issues and to approach this discussion as a mutual exploration.) Questions to consider as you wrap up this activity include:

- ⇒ Based on the list of “isms” that we generated during this activity, what can you conclude about power dynamics in our society? What groups have the most power and privilege in our society? What groups are oppressed?
- ⇒ How can groups and individuals work to challenge the distribution of power within our society?
- ⇒ What do social scientists mean when they state that “reverse racism” and “reverse sexism” cannot exist?
- ⇒ How do you think prejudice can best be challenged? In your opinion, is it possible for people to overcome prejudiced beliefs? Why or why not?

Oppression Circles

What steps

can you take

to help

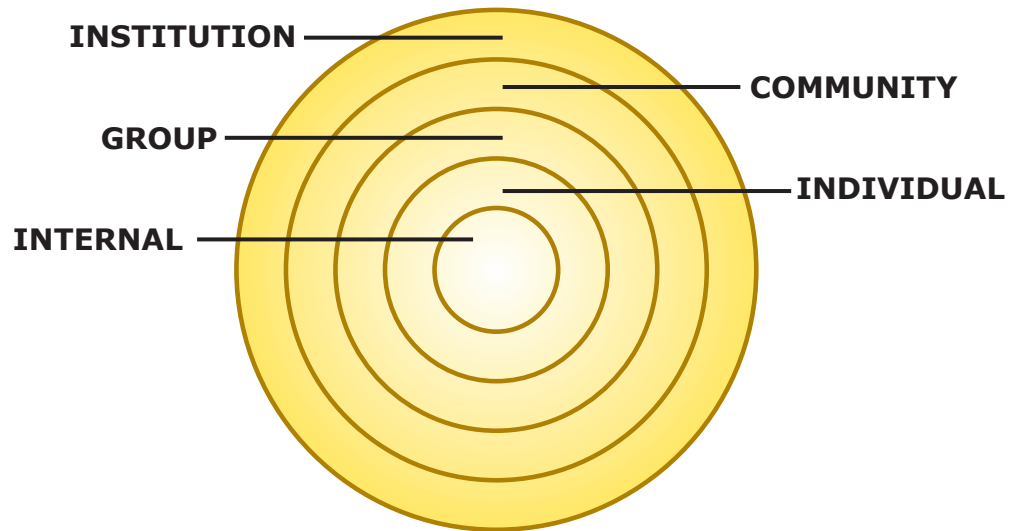
**end
oppression?**

Ready... Oppression takes different forms in different cultures, countries, communities, families and relationships. To fully understand how oppression works, it is illuminating to examine oppression on all levels.

Set... **People:** Entire group, prepared facilitator

Tools: One sheet of flip-chart paper

Time: 10–20 minutes



GO! Prepare the flip-chart in advance with five concentric circles. Label the circles, from smallest to largest, as they appear above: internal, individual, group, community and institution. Explain what each circle means, and ask the group to give additional examples of each form of oppression: **Internalized oppression** is the process by which people who are the targets of oppression begin to believe the prejudices directed against them. *Example:* A deaf man thinks that he deserves to be treated poorly because he is deaf.

Individual oppression occurs between people in one-on-one interactions. *Example:* A landlord refuses to rent an apartment to a prospective tenant because of the tenant's race, gender or sexual orientation.

Group oppression is oppression a person feels within a group of people. *Example:* A group of friends makes plans to take a trip together without recognizing that one member of the group cannot afford to participate.

Community oppression is oppression that one experiences within a community to which they belong. *Example:* A lesbian attends a house of worship that preaches homosexuality is a sin.



Oppression Circles (continued)

Institutionalized oppression occurs when society gives privilege to one group at the expense of another through the use of language, media, education, religion, economics and laws. *Example:* When a person watches TV, they see primarily white people as actors, anchors and talk-show hosts.



Once you have gone over the oppression circles, **ask each participant to think about the times that they have been oppressive or have used their privilege over someone else.** Give group members about five minutes for this brainstorming. You can ask participants to write down their responses. Once everyone is finished, return to the large group and ask for volunteers to share their responses. Use the following questions to spark a discussion:

- ⇒ Do you see people oppressing each other in the hallways of our school? If so, how?
- ⇒ What form of oppression do you see occur most frequently in society? How and where does it take place? In which of the oppression circles does this behavior fit?
- ⇒ How did thinking about oppressing someone else feel?
- ⇒ What steps can you take to help end oppression on each of the five levels addressed in this activity?

placing the Isms

Some forms of oppression are **obvious and public**, while other forms are **concealed and hidden**

Ready... Activity 5.4, “Oppression Circles,” should have given you a better understanding of the different forms that oppression takes within our society. Now it’s time to deepen your awareness of institutionalized oppression—and of the ways in which all of us perpetuate forms of oppression every day. This activity is designed to give you an opportunity to learn more about institutionalized and individual oppression as they occur within American society.

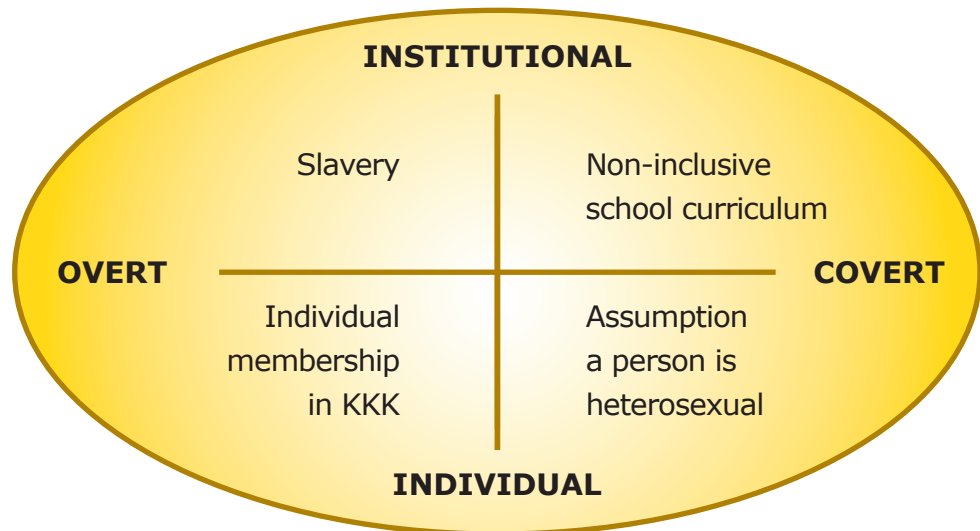
Set... **People:** Entire group, facilitator

Tools: Flip-chart paper or chalkboard, Post-it notes

Time: 25 minutes

GO! On a flip-chart or chalkboard, create the following diagram:

OVERT AND COVERT FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION



In Activity 5.4, you saw that **institutionalized oppression** occurs when a society values and gives privilege to one group over another through the use of the media, government, education, religion and laws. You also discovered that **individual oppression** occurs when one person oppresses another person. **Covert** activity is concealed, disguised or hidden, while **overt** actions are public or obvious to everyone in society. The chart above enables us to see not only the different levels of oppression that occur in our society, but also the different ways in which oppression occurs.

Placing the ISMS (continued)

As a group, discuss the four quadrants of the chart. If participants do not know what the words “covert” and “overt” mean, define these terms. Then ask: Why was each example of oppression placed as it was on the chart? Invite participants to write down examples of oppression they have seen or heard about—both contemporary and historical—on Post-it notes (one act per note). Have group members place their notes on the chart in the category that they fit best. Once all the notes have been affixed to the chart, have the large group review their placement and discuss if each example of oppression has been placed in the correct section of the chart.

Anti-Oppression Work

In what
concrete
ways

can your
student club

counter
oppression?

Ready... Now that the group has gotten a better understanding of power, privilege and oppression, it's time to bring your focus back to creating an anti-oppressive student club. It is important to bear in mind that the following activity will look different for participants who have privilege and for those who do not have privilege.

Set... **People:** Entire group, facilitator

Tools: Flip-chart paper, markers, scrap paper

Time: 25 minutes

Go! As a large group, brainstorm three to five reasons why it is important to make student clubs and community spaces safe for, and inclusive of, all students. Next, have participants break into pairs and give each pair a sheet of flip-chart paper and a marker. Ask them to

think back to the oppression circles and specifically to the concept of Group Oppression. (Group Oppression occurs when a person feels oppressed within a group of people.)

Have the pairs discuss ways in which your student club has been oppressive.

For example, is the discussion always inclusive of the younger members of your group, or do the older participants dominate meetings? Do you regularly address trans issues? Do you acknowledge straight allies? Are assumptions made about participants' economic status and their ability to pay for and participate in activities that involve spending money?

Next, **ask the pairs to brainstorm concrete ways your student club or community group could work to counter oppression and make spaces safer for all students.** After giving the pairs ten minutes, have everyone come back together and invite each pair to share their ideas and suggestions with the rest of the group.



Being an Ally

Ready... As you have seen, oppression takes many forms. This activity focuses on a weapon that is effective against all forms of oppression: allies.

What is an ally?

An ally is a member of a privileged group who takes a stand against oppression. Examples of allies include:

White people who speak out against racism.

Straight people who work to end heterosexism.

An ally works to be a part of social change rather than being part of oppression.

Think about

the ways in which we can

all be

allies to each other

Set... **People:** Entire group, facilitator

Tools: Flip-chart paper, marker, scrap paper, Post-it notes

Time: 20 minutes

GO! Ask participants to partner with someone they do not know very well. Encourage them to discuss and write down what the word “ally” means to them. After about five minutes, write the word “Ally” at the top of a piece of flip-chart paper. Invite each pair to share what they wrote down or talked about. Record all answers on the flip-chart paper. Once everyone has spoken, write “How To Be an Ally” on a clean piece of flip-chart paper. **Ask participants to take a few minutes to think about how they could be allies to two different groups of oppressed people.**

“As a straight person, I am going to speak out every time I hear a homophobic comment.”

Have participants write their responses on Post-it notes and affix the notes to a sheet of flip-chart paper. Once everyone has posted their notes, ask volunteers to explain how they are going to be allies. Then have each participant take two Post-it notes that are not theirs off the flip-chart. Encourage group members to keep these notes with them as reminder of the different ways in which we can all be allies to each other.

