

AN ALLY'S GUIDE TO
TALKING ABOUT



Marriage for Same-Sex Couples



OVERVIEW

Public support for allowing same-sex couples to marry is growing significantly, with national polls now consistently showing that a majority of Americans support the freedom to marry. This surge in support has followed years of important public and one-on-one 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 guide provides a number of proven approaches that can help move marriage discussions forward.

TALKING ABOUT MARRIAGE

There are four essential approaches for sustaining and building support for the freedom to marry. 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 recognize that they wouldn’t want to deny others that indispensable chance at love and commitment in marriage. Third, we must remind people of how our shared beliefs—including the Golden Rule, freedom, and not judging others—are at the heart of people’s journeys toward support. And finally, we need to share stories that allow people to see and embrace their own journey toward supporting the freedom to marry.

Focus on the Values of Marriage

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—to the person we love, to our families, and to the people whose lives we share. Marriage is about the commitment we make to the one we love, and the promise a couple makes, in front of family and friends, 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.
2. We can also remind people that **“When you talk with a committed same-sex couple, you realize they hope to marry for the same reasons as everyone else—to build and share a life together, to be there for each other, for better or for worse.”** Straight and gay couples alike 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 or 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

Examples: Focus on the Values of Marriage

Throughout this guide we illustrate each of the approaches for talking about marriage with examples from successful campaigns for the freedom to marry. For additional resources, please visit www.whymarriagematters.org.

Love, Commitment, a Sharing of a Life Together

Washington State Sen. Cheryl Pflug (2012)



I know a number of gay and lesbian couples. I saw in these couples love, commitment, a sharing of a life together—everything that makes for a good marriage.

When I was raising my children, we talked a lot about treating others the way you would want to be treated. I think that applies here, too.

As a Republican, I believe in freedom. And that includes the freedom to marry the person you love.

They Hope to Marry for the Same Reasons As Everyone Else

Washington – Chad and Lisa Johnson



Chad: We’ve been married for six years.

Lisa: And we have two sons. We became friends with Colleen and LeAnn because our sons are in preschool together. We’d never met a family with two moms before.

Chad: They’re a regular family. They read stories, they play Legos. They watch cartoons.

Lisa: They’re really good parents. And we’ve become good friends. Same-sex couples may seem different...

Chad: ...but we’ve realized they hope to marry for similar reasons as everyone else.

Lisa: To share and build a life together.

Source: Washington United for Marriage (both examples)

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.

Emphasize Why Caring People Don't Deny Others the Chance of Happiness in Marriage

3. Conversations about marriage often make people reflect on how they see themselves—particularly when they realize how shutting committed couples out of marriage hurts same-sex couples and their families. When people think about it, they often realize that's not the kind of person they are—or the kind of person they want to be: **"Denying someone the chance at happiness that comes with being married—just because they're gay—goes against my values. I'm not the kind of person who tells someone else that they can't marry the person they love."**
4. When people reflect on their own hopes and dreams for marriage, it can help them realize they don't want to deny those hopes and dreams to same-sex couples: **"Marriage is a lifetime commitment, that special vow two people make in front of friends and family to be there for each other for better or for worse, in sickness and in health. When you think of your own reasons for wanting to be married, you can imagine why same-sex couples would also dream of having the happiness, security and**

Example: Emphasize Why Caring People Don't Deny Others the Chance of Happiness in Marriage

How Could I Deny Any Couple That Incredible Bond of Marriage?

Washington State Rep. Maureen Walsh (2012)



I was married for 23 years to the love of my life, and he died six years ago. And I miss him every day.

I think to myself, how could I deny any couple, whether they're gay or straight, that incredible bond of marriage? Allowing marriage for same-sex couples is a question of fundamental fairness. We're all God's children. Who am I to pass judgment on others?

As a Republican, I don't believe the government should tell anyone who they can or cannot marry.

Source: Washington United for Marriage

responsibility of marriage. I wouldn't want to deny that to someone else simply because they're gay."

Affirm Our Shared Values

5. Treating others as we would want to be treated—the Golden Rule—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: **"I believe 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."**
6. 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."**
7. Most Americans share a deep belief in freedom—one that is rooted in our nation's traditions: **"Marriage is a basic freedom that should not be denied to anyone. In our country, freedom means freedom for everyone. No member of anyone's family should be singled out for unfair treatment or denied their basic American freedoms just because of who they are and who they love."**

Example: Affirm Our Shared Values

Protecting Individual Freedom

Maine State Rep. Stacey Fitts (2012)



I've always been a Republican. I voted against same-sex marriage in 2009. But I know some gay people, and I've talked with them—and with my family.

Deciding who you marry is the most important decision you'll ever make. I don't believe the government should tell anybody who they can love, or who they can marry.

Voting yes protects religious freedom, and it protects individual freedom. To me, that's what our country is all about.

We should allow gay people the freedom to marry, and we should protect individual liberty, too. Voting yes on Question 1 will do both.

Source: Mainers United for Marriage

Examples: Affirm Our Shared Values

I'm Not Going to Judge Him

Maine - Firefighters



From left to right: Andrew Shea, Dave Lorandau, Eric Humphrey, Ryan Michel

Eric: I've been a firefighter for 16 years—and combined, the four of us here have over 30 years of experience.

Ryan: These guys are all straight, so when I joined the department, I wondered how a brotherhood so tight like that would be accepting of someone who's gay.

Andrew: The brotherhood that we have is not the straight fireman's brotherhood; it's the fireman's brotherhood.

Dave: If a guy works hard and does his job, I'm not going to judge him. And we're not going to judge him either.

Eric: When we clear the call, I get to go home to my wife. The guys I work with should be able to marry the person they love.

Source: Mainers United for Marriage

He Gave His Life Protecting Our Freedoms

Minnesota State Rep. John Kriesel (2011)



I joined the military because I love this country, and I went to Iraq. I was in an incident and nearly died. I remember laying there, looking down and seeing my legs mangled. I thought about my family.



This is a photo of Corporal Andrew Wilfahrt. He gave his life in Afghanistan protecting our freedoms. He was gay. I cannot look at this picture and say, corporal, you were good enough to fight for your country and give your life, but you were not good enough to marry the person you love.

Source: Minnesotans United for All Families

Share Stories of the Journey to Support

It's clear that Americans are on a journey toward greater support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and same-sex couples. But even some of today's strong advocates for marriage didn't necessarily start out as supporters.

Many people report experiencing a gradual change of heart when it comes to their support of the freedom to marry. They are wrestling with genuine feelings and beliefs, and are going through a process of understanding why marriage matters to all committed couples—gay and straight alike.

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

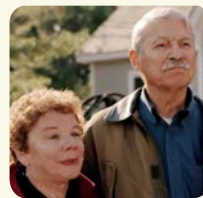
The great news is that anyone can share these stories. Straight friends and family can share their own journeys, and LGBT people can share stories of family members and friends who once felt conflicted but journeyed toward supporting their friend's or loved ones' freedom to marry.

The most important thing to remember in sharing these stories is to ensure that they are authentic. People who are on this journey aren't "bigots" or "hateful"—they're people who care about their gay friends, family members, co-workers and neighbors, and they've come gradually to understand how important marriage is to the people they care about. Telling their stories with empathy and appreciation—without dismissing or blaming them for their struggle—can model that journey for others and strengthen them for the path ahead.

Example: Share Journey Stories

A Commitment from the Heart

Maine - Will & Arlene Brewster



Our son Hal led a platoon in Iraq. When he got back, he sat us down and said, Mom, Dad—I'm gay.

That took some getting used to. But we love him, and we're proud of him.

Our marriage has been the foundation of our lives for 46 years. We used to think civil unions were enough for gay couples. But marriage is a commitment from the heart. A civil union is no substitute.

Our son fought for our freedoms. He should have the freedom to marry.

Source: Mainers United for Marriage

Example: Share Journey Stories

A Change in Perspective

President Barack Obama's Interview with ABC News' Robin Roberts (May 9, 2012)



I've been going through an evolution on this issue... I had hesitated on gay marriage, in part, because I thought civil unions would be sufficient. That that was something that would give people hospital visitation rights and other elements that we take for granted. And I was sensitive to the fact that, for a lot of people, the word marriage was something that evokes very powerful traditions, religious beliefs, and so forth.

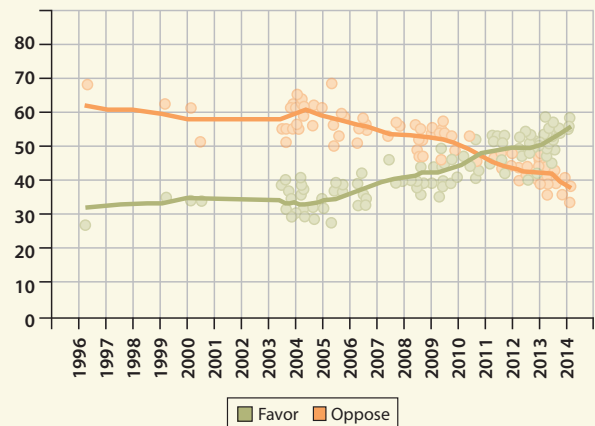
But I have to tell you that over the course of several years, as I talk to friends and family and neighbors; when I think about members of my own staff who are incredibly committed, in monogamous relationships, same-sex relationships, who are raising kids together; when I think about those soldiers or airmen or marines or sailors who are out there fighting on my behalf—and yet feel constrained, even now that Don't Ask, Don't Tell is gone, because they're not able to commit themselves in a marriage... At a certain point, I've just concluded that, for me personally, it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same-sex couples should be able to get married...

You know, Malia and Sasha, they've got friends whose parents are same-sex couples. And I—you know, there have been times where Michelle and I have been sitting around the dinner table, and we've been talking about their friends and their parents. And Malia and Sasha would—it wouldn't dawn on them that somehow their friends' parents would be treated differently. It doesn't make sense to them. And frankly, that's the kind of thing that prompts a change of perspective. You know, not wanting to somehow explain to your child why somebody should be treated differently, when it comes to the eyes of the law.

Public Opinion and the Journey Toward Support

Analysis of polling conducted since 1996 shows that Americans are rapidly becoming more supportive of marriage. A solid, growing majority of Americans now support the freedom to marry, with average support rising more than 20 points in just 10 years—from 33% in 2004 to 54% by early 2014.

National Polls & Support for Marriage: 1996-2014



Reprinted with permission from The Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law. Analysis at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/14/support-for-same-sex-marriage-is-increasing-faster-than-ever-before/>.

While generational divides in support for marriage have remained relatively constant, support has been growing rapidly across age groups. A Nov/Dec 2013 poll of 4,509 U.S. adults by Public Religion Research Institute found that support among the youngest and oldest groups of Americans has increased by nearly equal amounts in the past decade—by 24% among ages 18-33, and by 25% among ages 68 and older.

Additionally, 40% of Republicans in a March 2014 *Washington Post*/ABC News poll said they support allowing same-sex couples to marry, with 23% strongly supportive. Among self-identified moderates, support is at 64%. And among U.S. Catholics, a March 2013 *New York Times*/CBS News poll found that 62% support marriage for same-sex couples.

Support is also growing in states that have yet to extend the freedom to marry. A December 2013 poll conducted in states where same-sex couples cannot marry found that a majority of registered voters in those states (51%-41%) support the freedom to marry. Voters support allowing same-sex couples to marry by a 23-point margin (59%-36%) in the Central part of the U.S., by a 19-point margin in Western states (53%-34%), and in Southern states, voters were evenly split, 46%-46%. Additional information on this and other public opinion research is available at www.freedomtomarry.org/polling.

Reminding your audience that an ever-growing majority of Americans support the freedom to marry can help give them permission to join that majority.

Building the Emotional Connection

One of the challenges of talking about marriage for same-sex couples is that some 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 whom you'd make that commitment. 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.

Building support for marriage isn't about debating or arguing about "rights." It's about helping people 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.

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.

Following the 2013 U.S. Supreme Court decision striking down part of the "Defense of Marriage Act," it can be tempting to focus on the many legal protections now extended to married same-sex couples. Instead, focus how those protections help couples and families: *"Committed couples want to be there for each other through thick and thin, grow old together, and retire with dignity. And marriage provides the essential protections—from family medical leave to Social Security to veterans' benefits—that help support and strengthen American families."*

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.

Terminology: Talking About Marriage

General Terms

- Talk about **marriage**, without modifiers. Avoid terms like "gay marriage" and "same-sex marriage"; say *marriage for same-sex couples* or *marriage for gay and lesbian 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. Try talking about the *freedom to marry* instead.

Marriage Values

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

Shared Beliefs

- treating others as you would want to be treated
 - protecting the freedoms of all committed couples
 - not denying others the chance of happiness in marriage
 - not sitting in judgment of others
 - treating others with respect
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.
 4. **AVOID comparisons to interracial marriage or to the Civil Rights Movement.** These comparisons can alienate African Americans, and they typically don't help people understand how same-sex couples are hurt when they are shut out of marriage. While some in the African American community (including black clergy) embrace Civil Rights language in talking about the freedom to marry, there is still resistance to such comparisons among many African Americans. Amid rapidly growing public support for the freedom to marry among African Americans, it's important to talk about the issues in ways that continue to build common ground, rather than in ways that create distance.

When Opponents Try to Change the Subject

Poll after poll has demonstrated that a majority of Americans now support the freedom to marry. 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, or saying that the freedom to marry will result in lawsuits against business owners. 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—and bring the conversation back to the values we share.

If you need to counter 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.”

The examples below provide illustrations of how marriage supporters have helped calm the anxieties created by anti-gay opponents while at the same time allowing people to see that extending the freedom to marry affirms our common values.

Pastor Michael & Robyn Gray

Maine



Robyn: Some people are asking what effect same-sex marriage will have on churches in Maine.

Pastor Michael: Question 1 says that same-sex couples can get marriage licenses, and that churches don't have to perform any weddings that go against their beliefs.

This law protects churches' beliefs, and protects them from lawsuits—which are both good things.

Robyn: Maine has the chance to allow all committed couples the freedom to marry, and protect the religious freedoms of churches at the same time.

Michael: That's why we're voting Yes on Question 1.

Source: Mainers United for Marriage (both examples)

Rob Stanton & Amy Bongard

Maine



Amy: I've been teaching here in Maine for about 15 years.

Being a parent is the hardest job in the world, but also the best job in the world. The key is constant communication.

Like most kids today, our children already know people who are gay or lesbian. We talk about it as a family.

Rob: When it comes to same-sex marriage, we want our children to know that all loving, committed couples should be able to get married.

Amy: What we do in a school is no substitute for what happens at home. That's where family values come in; that's where core values come in.

Rob: No law is going to change the core values we teach our kids here at home.

Talking About Marriage: An Overview

“Marriage says a lifelong promise of love and commitment in a way that no other word does.”

<p>1. Focus on the values of marriage</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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. “When you talk with a committed same-sex couple, you realize they hope to marry for the same reasons as everyone else—to build and share a life together, to be there for each other, for better or for worse.”
<p>2. Emphasize why caring people don’t deny others the chance at happiness in marriage</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. “Denying someone the chance at happiness that comes with being married—just because they’re gay—goes against my values. I’m not the kind of person who tells someone else that they can’t marry the person they love.” 4. “Marriage is a lifetime commitment, that special vow two people make in front of friends and family to be there for each other for better or for worse, in sickness and in health. When you think of your own reasons for wanting to be married, you can imagine why same-sex couples would also dream of having the happiness, security and responsibility of marriage. I wouldn’t want to deny that to someone else, simply because they’re gay.”
<p>3. Affirm our shared values</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. “I believe 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.” 6. “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.” 7. “Marriage is a basic freedom that should not be denied to anyone. In our country, freedom means freedom for everyone. No member of anybody’s family—gay or straight—should be singled out for unfair treatment or denied their basic American freedom, just because of who they are and who they love.”
<p>4. Share stories of the journey toward support</p>	<p>Stories of those whose attitudes have changed over time can provide a steadying hand on the shoulder of those who are struggling to do the right thing. Sharing these stories, especially if the journeys are personal ones, can give people permission to embrace their own journey.</p> <p>Telling authentic journey stories with empathy and appreciation—without dismissing or blaming people for their struggle—can model that journey for others and strengthen them for their own path ahead.</p>



Love. Commitment. Family.
WHY MARRIAGE MATTERS



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, an Ally’s Guide to Terminology, an Ally’s Guide to Talking About Transgender-Inclusive Non-Discrimination Laws, an Ally’s Guide to Talking About Adoption by LGBT Parents, Talking About LGBT Equality with African Americans, Talking About LGBT Equality with Latinos & Hispanics, Suicide & LGBT Populations, Inclusive Hate Crimes Laws, Ending Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, and Inclusive Employment Protections. For downloadable versions, visit www.lgbtmap.org/talkingaboutseries. © 2014 Movement Advancement Project (MAP).