

# STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVING AND THRIVING IN THE FACE OF ANTI-LGBTI STIGMA

*LGBTI people can draw on multiple resources to enhance their ability to cope in the face of anti-LGBTI stigma. In fact, LGBTI people often emerge from such experiences with new knowledge, commitment, and higher self-esteem. These changes are due not directly to the anti-LGBTI stigma but rather to LGBTI people's ability to confront anti-LGBTI experiences while drawing on a number of rich sources of support.*

## ANALYSIS OF HOMOPHOBIA & TRANSPHOBIA

One of the most useful perspectives for LGBTI people facing anti-LGBTI stigma is to recognize the political reality of homophobia and transphobia. It is critical to understand homophobia and transphobia as forms of social oppression rather than as a phenomena that target one personally. This social and political view of oppression provides some insulation against the anti-LGBTI rhetoric that is so prominent in speech to limit LGBTI civil rights. In addition, thinking through their experience also helps LGBTI people to connect their internal struggles with homophobia and transphobia to the external world. Seeing homophobia and transphobia as larger social process helps LGBTI people to understand how much they have in common with other LGBTI people and, therefore, to recognize the value of collective action. Turning our view of homophobia and transphobia around is the flip side of the stress generated by anti-LGBTI attitudes. Recognition creates new possibilities—it symbolizes a renewed opportunity for all Kenyans to do battle against all bigotry. This sort of perspective allows LGBTI people to resist internalized homophobia/transphobia and to see anti-LGBTI 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. LGBTI people can translate their encounter with homophobia and transphobia into various forms of direct action: coming out, getting involved in the community, and doing activist work.

## ACTION

A number of observers have pointed out that fights against LGBTI stigma tend to stimulate LGBTI communities. Here are four ways that public debates over LGBT rights can serve LGBTI communities:

- By increasing media visibility.
- By giving LGBTI people a forum for countering anti-LGBTI rhetoric.
- By offering LGBTI people an opportunity to exercise free expression.
- Giving LGBTI people a chance to make new information available to the public.

When LGBTI people respond to anti-LGBTI oppression by building and strengthening their communities, they can accomplish a number of important ends:

- Increasing self-knowledge.
- Increasing self-empowerment.
- Decreasing isolation.
- Decreasing internalized homophobia.
- Decreasing a sense of powerlessness.

One of the most obvious and widespread responses to anti-LGBTI stigma has been for LGBTI people to come out. Their doing so has resulted in significant changes at the community level by providing more varied and accurate representations of LGBTI people and decreasing isolation for LGBT people; as well as significant changes at the individual level by needing to expend less energy dedicated to secrecy and hiding, contributing to a sense of empowerment, and enhancing the ability to engage in collective action. Each person needs to decide the degree to which they are comfortable being out about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression.

## ALLIES

A final, often neglected factor that can promote resilience for LGBTI people is the visibility of heterosexuals and cis-gender people who take public stands in support of LGBTI rights. Clearly, heterosexual and cis-gender allies are important for their work in the political arena. They also act as significant sources of social and psychological support for LGBTI people. The presence of active allies can counter the sense of isolation and powerlessness that LGBTI people sometimes experience. LGBTI people are well-advised to make a point of noticing the presence of heterosexual and cis-gender allies rather than focusing all their attention on heterosexuals and cis-gender people who oppose LGBTI rights. This factor should also remind heterosexual and cis-gender allies of an important effect of their actions: in addition to whatever concrete support they may give on behalf of LGBTI rights, their very presence often results in a psychological benefit for LGBTI people.

The time may come when attacks on the LGBTI community disappear. Until that time, we must take care of ourselves as individuals and as a community when we encounter anti-LGBTI efforts

## SELF CARE

Self care is important in order to protect your physical and psychological health in the face of LGBTI stigma and discrimination. It is important for those who experience anti-LGBTI stigma, especially those who are seeking to help others. It also recognizes that any anti-LGBTI stigma can have negative effects, and that in order to fight for LGBTI rights we have to take care of ourselves. Following are five domains where you can practice self care:

### Emotional

- Seek out support; seek sources of humor

### Psychological

- Journal your thoughts; share feelings with close others

### Spiritual

- Pray, meditate, reflect

### Professional

- Form colleague support network

### Physical

- Exercise regularly; sleep and eat regularly



RESILIENCE +  
RESISTANCE  
COLLECTIVE

*Adapted from Russell, G. M. (2004). Surviving and thriving in the midst of anti-gay politics. Angles, 7(2), 1-7.*