

Myths and Facts about Gender Affirming Care- How to use them to be an Ally.

Good morning, Shabbat Shalom. Thank you to Rabbi Maria, Rabbi Adam and others who played a part in coordinating LGBTQ Pride here at GJC. I welcomed the invitation to speak and was honored to be asked.

My name is Dane Menkin, I am a family nurse practitioner and direct LGBTQ Services for Main Line Health. I have been providing direct LGBTQ health care for about 20 years, many of them in an LGBTQ health center and the last 6 at Main Line. I provide care for LGBTQ kids, adolescents and adults and enjoy a platform for providing education to clinicians and support teams who also are providing this care.

LGBTQ Pride is important. Have you stopped to think about why? Why am I here listening to something about the needs of LGBTQ people, specifically in this moment, transgender and non-binary people? You would have to be living under a rock to not know about the unprecedented outright attack on gender affirming care for children and adults happening not just in the US but around the world.

Why do I care about LGBTQ Pride or visibility? Maybe you know the answer. If you are like me, maybe sometimes you participate in things because it **feels** instinctively important, but you initially lack the insight to have figured out the language for precisely *why*. Let's talk about that why and your role in the answer.

I am often presented with the question "what can I say to people when they say something I know is wrong about transgender or NB people?" "How do I respond?"

We are going to return question to this, but let's start with some myths and some facts:

Myth 1: Kids are too young to know they are LGBT.

Fact: developmentally we have a sense of gender by about 2 or 3, we recognize and assert pronouns of others around us that early.

Our sense of our own gender identity is fixed by 7 or 8.

The expression of that gender identity is what changes and is shaped in adolescence and for some, well beyond that.

Myth 2: Letting transgender people use the bathroom that best aligns with their affirmed sex is dangerous and makes women particularly ,scared.

The fact behind this one is pretty uncomfortable..... become aware of your feet on the floor to be grounded for this one.

Fact: This myth is a direct vestige from slavery. It is based on the notion that black men would assault white women in bathrooms and those white women were too vulnerable to be able to be in a space (bathroom or other) where black men were present

Myth 3: People who transition often change their minds afterwards

Fact: Rates of regret are low. In 2023 a study published in JAMA of 235 people who underwent gender affirming chest surgery had NO ONE regret or attempt to reverse

Myth 4: Being trans or NB is a mental illness, sounds familiar to our LGB community, doesn't it?

Fact: Gender dysphoria is a diagnosis. In medicine and behavioral health, we use a diagnosis to get paid and guide treatment. There are many people who identify as transgender but never seek medical intervention. Remember the diagnosis is not the identity.

Consider this scenario- You are an invited dinner guest with a group of 15 people. A few people you know but many you are meeting for the 1st time. Conversation ebbs and flows over many topics and lands on a current event about transgender people. For our example we will say it is about the challenges transgender people are facing in accessing health care.

You hear someone say: ***"I believe that transgender people should have rights but I don't understand why I need to support them. It's a personal choice and I don't want to pay for it or be expected to agree with it"***.

There are some nods of approval,
Some eyes that quickly divert downwards,
Some vocal sounds of disapproval.
No one is confrontational.

Here it is; the moment when you decide if you are going to say something. You somehow know what was said isn't right but what makes it wrong? *What* do you say?

I am going to push pause and divert from our scenario to talk about **intent** versus **impact**. We will come back to it. You probably have heard of intent versus impact, it's not a new comparison.

- **Intent** is the motivation or reason behind our actions. It's what we are trying to achieve or the message we are trying to convey. In this room, I am comfortable saying we all have good intentions when it comes to our LGBTQ community here at GJC.
- **Impact** is the outcome or consequence of our actions or words. It's how our words or actions are received and interpreted by others. This is where sometimes we all fall down.

We miss a pronoun, we use the wrong name for someone, we assume they are in a heteronormative marriage. It happens. When it does, say I am sorry, don't dwell on it and don't do it again. There's often a gap between our intention and the perceived impact. What we mean can be different from how it's interpreted, leading to misunderstandings or even hurt feelings.

Now, back to our scenario, I am going to say that your desired **Intent** is one of allyship and solidarity for/with the transgender community. Maybe you consider yourself and ally, maybe that's new for you. Allyship looks different for everyone. The **impact** for you is: Am I going to say

something correctly? Am I going to mess this up? I am not an expert and am terrified I'll get the words wrong and look foolish or WORSE, be misunderstood.

Here is the conflict in our scenario (internally):

The participant has not said anything egregious. Nothing so inflammatory that there is a clear consensus that he or she is bigoted or extreme. There is no blanket dismissal like what we see when something happens that is universally unaccepted in a given environment.

However, is what they have said rooted in understanding and awareness?

Is there a way to help him/her "understand"?

Is the impact of what YOU will say going to match your intention?

How do your feelings about responding, change if you have a loved one who is transgender? Those stakes can get high, quickly.

WHAT CAN I DO??

Here are some tools that are helpful for you to be that ally and help distinguish myths from facts:

It requires bravery. You might need to remind yourself you can be brave, I need to sometimes. Ask a question. Sometimes something simple like "can you say more about what support you think is needed?" OR "do you know how much it costs to pay for gender affirming care? I don't"

It requires a willingness to be vulnerable. Something like: "I work in healthcare and can tell you we already pay for lots of people's healthcare. It is much cheaper to do so before someone is sick or injured because of something preventable like a mental health crisis or a visit to the ER after someone accesses street-level-care." At times, if I am able to have a conversation with someone, I will talk about the last time they accessed emergency care and how much of a challenge it was to wait for hours and spend maybe excessive money and how much easier it would have been if they had been able to go to see their provider for the stitches they needed or treatment they needed for their illness. Treating people in crisis (real or perceived) is by far the most expensive way to do it. All healthcare systems rely on prevention to avoid overburdening a system. When I am talking to someone who I don't think is going to connect to the Why being based in humanity, instead of judging that, I will switch to a more concrete concept--- the cost- the dollars spent.

Listen: Listen to the answers to the questions you ask. This is HARD and I am as guilty as anyone of being lousy at it. When we feel activated, we tend to ask a question and then immediately rehearse the next question or counter argument. We don't listen to the answer. When we don't listen, there is no dialogue. In a confrontational setting, this is where things devolve. In a civilized setting, we listen and respond- not react. Be sure you have decided which environment you are in ahead of time.

Vulnerable people can and do advocate for themselves- sometimes.

However, it really needs to be Allies that are visible. You, as a non-LGBTQ person, need to be The One.

The one with the sign

The one who makes the time or money donation

The one with the Bullhorn

The one with the Pride flag on your house

The one with the sticker on your car

The one who speaks up at the dinner table

The one who is uncomfortable but who's safety in the bathroom is not a consideration.

It must be you.

I was raised to know that Jews inherently understand the need for resistance and perseverance, I suspect that these are not just superficial values for you either.

So practice. Using unfamiliar language (queer, trans, gay, cis—consult your resident 14 year old if you need a refresher).

Rehearse- before you have any conversation, think about the beginning, the middle and the end.

How does your internal movie look?

Prepare – be safe. Always know when engaging is not safe or there is no safe Out for you. Choose your battles but also choose your battlefield.

Ask your transgender friends and family what they'd want you to say. Scripting is helpful. They are well aware of what is currently affecting them.

Being an LGBTQ ally in 2025 is harder than it was in 2024 but not harder than it was in 1985. Being an ally during the AIDS crisis took bravery, willingness to be vulnerable and willingness to listen.

Use the script- go read some personal narratives from LGBTQ Activists from the early AIDS crisis
Use the words used by those before us- we don't need to reinvent activism to be an ally.

We have the tools already- use your voice, use your dollars. There are protests happening literally today, here, in philly and all the surrounding suburbs

The LGBTQ community is not going away and neither are the ally's- remember that, it helps with accessing the bravery I mentioned before.

I want to close by reminding you to trust but verify things presented to you as facts. We are living in a culture where some people believe that just because someone says something, it is true.

When something doesn't sound right, pause.

Ask for clarification

Approach with curiosity

Be willing to be wrong but be ready to be right.

Thank you.