

New Possibilities Workshop

Author: Charles S. Collins

Goal: To move participants to understand how sexism and heterosexism limit possibilities for personal growth and interpersonal relationships for all individuals, regardless of sex or sexual orientation.

Audience: Adults and youth who are willing to explore how their possibilities have been limited and how new possibilities may be encouraged.

Description: This workshop is in three parts.

Part One Where are we?

Part Two: How did we get here?

Part Three: Where do we go from here?

Introduction/warm ups

1. The workshop begins with an overview of workshop goals, guidelines, etc.
2. Being different: In pairs the participants discuss how being different is sometimes seen as a positive thing and sometimes seen as a negative thing. Pairs share insights with the whole group.

Part One: Where are we?

The goal of this section is to demonstrate how sexism and heterosexism limit our personal life choices, whether we are male, female, gay, straight, bisexual, younger, or older.

1. Limited Choices: This activity raises the participants' awareness of how choices are shaped by fear of being different from the "norm."

The facilitator tells a story about an individual who is told that others perceive her (him) to be lesbian (gay) because of certain behaviors, personality traits, etc. After hearing the story, the participants are asked questions about the individual's feelings, potential changes of behavior, future decisions and life choices, etc.

2. It Happens to All of Us: This activity demonstrates how each of us has made personal choices based on the fear of being different or "queer."

The participants are first asked to brainstorm life choices which may be affected by the fear of being perceived as different. Responses may include: hobbies or interests, friendships, self-expression, topics of conversation, or job/careers.

The participants are asked to recall occasions when the fear of being perceived as "queer" has affected a personal choice. Depending upon the spirit of the group, this may be done as a personal reflective exercise or as a paired activity. In either case, the whole group gathers to share stories and insights.

Part Two: How did we get here?

The goal of this section is to demonstrate how our fears of being different serve to support an oppressive social structure built on sexism, sexual discrimination, sex role fixation, and heterosexism.

1. **A Model of Oppression:** The facilitator presents a model which depicts the interrelationships among the various kinds of sex-based oppressions. Myths and attitudes are learned during childhood and are perpetuated in adult institutions. Homophobia is depicted as a social force which keeps this oppressive social structure intact and in doing so stifles creativity self esteem, and healthy relationships.
2. **Reaching the Boiling Point:** The participants discuss ways in which people “act out” when living in an oppressive social structure. The list might include sexual abuse, rape/sexual assault, unhealthy marriages, alcoholism/chemical dependency, suicide, and unhealthy life styles.

Part Three: Where do we go from here?

The goal of this section is to discuss ways to break the cycle of sexual oppression.

1 **A Vicious Cycle:** The facilitator spins a vicious cycle which perpetuates the oppression of people whose sexualities are different from the “norm.” Essentially the cycle exists because being anything but heterosexual is perceived to be the worst thing a person can be. As social forces attempt to “contain deviancy”, non-heterosexual persons are treated with disdain, resulting in a strengthened societal belief that sexual difference is to be avoided at all costs. Participants are encouraged to help describe this cycle.

2. **Breaking the Cycle:** looking at a visual representation, the participants brainstorm ways to break through the cycle. The list may include:

- Educate people about the positive aspects of being gay, lesbian, or bisexual;
- Educate people about the positive features of gay culture;;
- Celebrate the uniqueness of each child;
- Provide opportunities for people who are different to dialog with one another.

If time permits, the group is broken into subgroups for developing strategies around each alternative. The subgroups then report back to the whole group.

Closing

The workshop concludes with participants listening to a recording of “Everything Possible.” Various groups have recorded this lullaby which encapsulates the message of the workshop. One such group is “The Flirtations.”

Editor’s note (added March, 1998)

Jim Tiefenthal transferred this document from paper to electronic format in March, 1998, at Rochester, NY. Betty Iwan proofread the text. Although loving care was taken to preserve the original text, MLCN cannot guarantee accuracy.