

## Tools for communicating about marriage equality and related issues

Marriage equality is a frequent topic of conversation in the media, in the community and in people's homes. While polls show that the majority of Australians support marriage equality, some groups strongly oppose it on ideological or religious grounds, or because it seems like a major change from what they are used to. The proposed marriage law postal vote means that groups will be campaigning to sway the electorate to their position.

It is critically important that the postal vote and accompanying campaigns are conducted respectfully and fairly; there is a real risk that they will also lead to an increase in hate speech, fear campaigning, and the perpetuation of hurtful and harmful stereotyping of LGBTQI+ communities.



### Communicating about marriage equality and related issues

This information sheet provides some helpful tips for people wanting to communicate in constructive ways about marriage equality and related issues like gender diversity, sexual orientation, homophobia, equality and justice. The more that people are engaging with others in respectful ways, the greater the chance that we can create peaceful and inclusive communities to everyone's benefit.

#### Why communicate?

Some people might find themselves hesitating or reluctant to talk about these issues with others. Often this is because they are worried about how the person/people they are talking to might react. They might worry that the other person will try to avoid the conversation, cut it short, or dominate the discussion. People might also believe that other people are too uninformed, closed-minded, aggressive, irrational or conservative to listen to opposing arguments. Fear or defensiveness can also lead us to underplay the subtlety of options and opinions. Rational discussion can become difficult because we argue in overly simplistic ways.

Unfortunately, avoiding talking about difficult topics for any of the above reasons will prevent us from building peaceful, inclusive and just communities. So talking with others about these issues is important. By starting with the postal vote and broadening out, we can support members of the LGBTQI+ community who are seeking an end to the discrimination that they experience in Australia.

These conversations are also valuable as a way of engaging more people on the broader aspects of this topic – the importance of tolerance and inclusiveness in our society. So expand your comfort zone by reaching out to people outside your own groups as well.

#### What can you do to communicate better?

Given the problems that people often experience in both listening and talking about sensitive issues, there are a number of strategies that can assist you to talk easily and constructively about such issues.

##### Listen to what the other person has to say

- Begin by simply paying attention to people expressing different ideas about marriage equality and related issues. Show interest in them as individuals, in their lives, their concerns and worries.
- Ask what the other person thinks and why.
- Acknowledge what the other person has said.
- Avoid labelling alternative views or behaviour in a derogatory way.
- Acknowledge criticism or legitimate concerns.



### **Look for points of contact with the other person and express your own views**

- Once people are engaged in a conversation, try to explore commonalities, differences, experiences, ideas, and information about a common concern.
- Comment on similarities that you see between your views and theirs.
- Present your view as an alternative, rather than the correct interpretation.
- Share your own personal journey of how you have come to the views that you hold on marriage equality. Show that views can change over time.
- Use foundational skills of communication dialogue such as being fully present, deep listening, respect, self-responsibility, clarity, authenticity, speaking one's own truth, and suspending judgment.

### **Become informed about marriage equality**

- Have a clear understanding of your topic and the facts to give you confidence and authority. For example:
  - Not being able to marry discriminates against people in same-sex relationships because it does not give them the same rights as heterosexual people.
  - Discrimination is hurtful and harmful to people.
  - Surveys show most adults in Australia support marriage equality.
  - Australia is now the last developed English-speaking country not to allow same-sex couples to marry.
  - Discrimination, gender-based bullying, anti-LGBTQI+ put-downs and hate speech have a detrimental impact on the mental health and wellbeing of members of these communities.
- Educate yourself on the language and definitions used in LGBTQI+ communities. There are **many websites** that can help with this.

### **Familiarise yourself with common arguments and useful counter-arguments on marriage equality**

- One misconception that some people hold is that the welfare of children will be harmed in same-sex families, and that children do better when they have both a mother and father.
  - While the research shows this isn't the case, this argument is irrelevant to marriage equality.
  - Marriage equality is about the fairness of same-sex attracted people being allowed to legally marry. It has nothing to do with whether they can or should be parents.
  - Many LGBTQI+ people are already parents, and children are already growing up in same-sex parented households. Preventing same-sex couples from marrying won't change this.
  - The research shows that children growing up with same-sex parents do at least as well as children with heterosexual parents on a range of psychological, social and educational measures.
  - What's important is to have a family that loves and cares for you (regardless of their gender or sexual orientation).

- Some people may be opposed to marriage equality on religious grounds.
  - Explain to them that an important principle in our society is to maintain a separation between religion and the state.
  - Also, a change in marriage laws will not mean that churches and ministers of faith have to change their practices.
- Some people have considered boycotting the postal vote because they don't want to legitimise what they see as poor governance. They argue that marriage equality is a right, and therefore shouldn't have to be voted on by the community. But legal rights often have to be demanded before they are granted. A yes vote is still probably a better option than a boycott if you are in favour of marriage equality.
- Remember, too, that not everybody, straight or gay, wants to get married. Some argue that the institution of marriage has always been controlling and discriminatory, that marriage should not be held up as the 'norm' we should all strive for, or the most desirable option for sanctioning a relationship. There are many different versions of love and intimacy.
- There are widely differing views in our society on many issues, but we are not usually expected to vote on each one.
- Remember that you don't have to know everything. Admitting that you 'don't know' does not invalidate your concern about these issues, it shows your audience that acting responsibly does not require a high degree of expertise.

#### **Practice with a friend beforehand**

If you are nervous about how to have this conversation, have a practice beforehand.

Begin with a role-play discussion, followed by a conversation with people likely to respond favourably, then move on to discussions with those likely to be more critical and argumentative.

#### **Be supportive of your LGBTQI+ friends and communities**

LGBTQI+ communities welcome support and offers to share the load and energy in what might be an exhausting and hard time for them personally during the marriage equality vote.

- Let your friends know that you care about them and check in to see how they are going during the public debates about marriage equality.
- Get involved, be supportive and work in partnership with LGBTQI+ communities by talking about marriage equality with the people around you, sharing articles and social media (especially those written by LGBTQI+ people themselves), and encouraging people to vote.
- Ask your LGBTQI+ friends and communities what else you could do to help.
- Encourage your friends to consider getting some psychological support if they are feeling distressed.
- Talking with a psychologist may be helpful if you feel you or your family need further assistance with issues that are raised during the marriage law postal vote debates.





### **Take action towards a more equal, gender inclusive society**

- Get involved with groups that are promoting peace and tolerance in our communities.
- Encourage people to register to vote, and to support marriage equality.
- Take seriously even small acts of intolerance, and speak up, because silence can be seen as acceptance.
- If you see discrimination happening, say something.
- Interrupt name calling and harassment.
- Ask friends not to tell homophobic or transphobic jokes around you.

Be careful with some of these actions, however, if there is a significant possibility of a physically aggressive reaction. Practice your responses with friends first, if possible, before trying them out with people with contrary views.

### **Look carefully at your own prejudices**

We all grow up with prejudices, and it is important to regularly check in, acknowledge and address them. By doing this, and showing others around you that you are not perfect but open to challenging your own ideas and assumptions, you increase your own tolerance and acceptance and also model the possibility that people can change and learn.

- Notice the language you use yourself, and the assumptions you make.
- Ask yourself how many gender diverse friends you have.
- Do you protest when people make homophobic jokes, and ask them to stop?
- Ask yourself how well your workplace, school and local groups are doing in terms of gender diversity and inclusiveness.