

Creating a safe space



Why safe space?

There are times when LGBT people feel unsafe in social spaces, services, housing, or other environments. They may be experiencing prejudice or discrimination, or they may be worried about what would happen if they did. This can mean that often LGBT people find it difficult to access certain spaces, or don't reveal their LGBT identities when they do.

A safe space commitment sets out the expectations for everyone in a space – it forms an agreement for how people treat each other and what the space is like. As well as discouraging discriminatory behaviour, it helps to make LGBT people feel more confident that prejudice will be challenged. It also supports staff to do so in a firm but supportive way.

The aim is to make the space a comfortable and positive place for everyone, regardless of identity or background. It offers consistency and helps people to know what to expect, allows people to participate fully, and reduces uncertainties and anxiety.

We've put together some suggestions to help you to develop a safe space commitment and put it into practice.

Create a safe space commitment

Putting together your commitment is a great chance to get people talking about the issues and discussing what they would like the space to be like. If you can, get together with both staff and the people who use the space to discuss it.

The commitment should give clear and simple statements about how people should treat each other in the space – you might like to include respecting each other, listening to each other, respecting boundaries... As an example, the LGBT Health and Wellbeing Safe Space Commitment is included in our Top Ten Tips booklet, which is available on our website (see next page).

Support staff to uphold the safe space commitment

Make sure that staff feel confident in challenging discrimination and other behaviour which breaches the safe space commitment – and make sure they have a good knowledge of what might make people feel unsafe, eg what language is offensive. This is a great chance to run some LGBT awareness training, along with activities like role play scenarios to practice ways to challenge discrimination. Encourage staff to refer back to the commitment to support their challenges.

Make sure people know about & understand the commitment

Display copies of the commitment in prominent places, and discuss it with both staff and the people who use the space. Make sure that they know what it means, and understand what it's asking of them.

Safe space also applies to other kinds of discrimination – talk about how respect means no sexism, racism, ableism etc, as well as no homophobia, biphobia or transphobia.

Make sure everyone knows the ground rules by running through the commitment at the start of events/activities, or when someone uses the space for the first time. This provides reassurance to those who might be worried, as well as supporting people to honour the commitment.

You can also include the commitment in your advertising / information.

Why might people breach a safe space commitment?

It's important to try to understand some of the difficulties that people might be having which lead them to breach the Safe Space

Commitment. Some people may:

- have less developed social skills
- not be aware of the expectations within the space
- not be aware that they are causing offence
- not have thought about the impact of their words/behaviour

What should you do if someone breaches the safe space commitment?

The purpose of the commitment is not, to tell people off, but to support them to participate in a way which is safer and more comfortable for everyone.

It's a good idea to take a stepped approach:

- In the first instance, make a supportive challenge, which encourages them to think about the impact of their words and/or behaviour
- If they don't respond to this, you may need to take further steps to explain what part of their behaviour is breaching the Safe Space Commitment, and explain clearly how they can modify their behavior
- If they continue with the behaviour, or if it escalates, you may need to ask them to leave.

Challenge the behaviour, not the person

When dealing with a tricky situation, remember to explain clearly what the problem with the behaviour is, and explain how they might change it. While they should take responsibility for their actions, it's important not to characterise them as a bad person – they may not have realised that what they were doing was hurtful, and challenging them gently but firmly is the most effective way to support them to change their behaviour.

If someone does have a prejudiced opinion, and isn't willing to change it, you can take the line that regardless of their views, it's not acceptable to express prejudice in the space.

Some useful phrases

"I'm just wondering how I would feel if I was _____ and I heard you say that. What do you think?"

"It's important that everyone feels safe and welcome here."

"That's an assumption – what makes you think that?"

"I just need to stop you there, I'm aware we haven't heard from some of the others, and I want to make sure everybody has the chance to contribute."

"It's important that we use the right pronouns for people whether they're here or not – please make sure that you use 'she' and 'her' when you're talking about [name]."

"The things you are saying are beginning to sound quite negative towards _____ people."

"It would be great to continue the conversation, but first I need to ask you to stop using the word _____, as it's quite offensive. _____ is a better word to use."

More resources are available to download for free at
lgbthealth.org.uk/resources