

Identity/Expression Activity

learning what it feels like to hide who you are by Caroline Gould

adapted from various sources and used by the Massachusetts Department of Education's Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students

CATEGORY: Empathy

GENERAL PURPOSE: This is an extremely good exercise to use to help participants identify with the pain, frustrations, and consequences of hiding and denying one's identity.

INTENDED AUDIENCE: This has a tendency to work better with adults than with students, although it has been used successfully with students.

ESTIMATED TIME NECESSARY: Between 15-30 minutes, depending on the size and involvement of the audience. Be sure to leave enough time for discussion.

MATERIALS: Something big enough to write on so your audience can see what you've written (chalkboard, news pad and easel, etc.). Possibly may need index cards for the extended variant.

STEPS:

- 1.) Draw two columns, labeling them "Identity" and "Expression." Leave room on the board for another two columns later or be sure you can flip to another page of newsprint.
- 2.) Encourage discussion and input from participants as to what kinds of things constitute the many identities we have. Write them down as people call them out under the "Identity" column. Consider the following list and prompt your audience only when they get stuck: GENDER, RACE, AGE, EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND, PROFESSION, CLASS, ETHNICITY, RELIGION, RELATIONSHIPS TO OTHERS (or parent, sibling, daughter, son, friend, spouse, etc.), GEOGRAPHY (Southerner, Yankee, etc.), ABILITY/DISABILITY, HEALTH, etc.
- 3.) Nine times out of ten, you are going to have to solicit the category of identity known as SEXUAL ORIENTATION. It is possible to make a point of the fact that you usually have to solicit this identity category.
- 4.) Next, ask participants to brainstorm the various ways in which those identities can be expressed. Responses can include FOOD, MUSIC, ART, LITERATURE, CLOTHING, HAIRSTYLES, MANNERISMS, PACE OF LIFE, PROFESSIONS CHOSEN OR AVAILABLE TO YOU, WHO YOU RELATE TO, LANGUAGE/DIALECT, DAILY ROUTINE, TYPE OF HOME YOU LIVE IN, THE WAY YOU RELATE TO OTHERS, THE WAY IN WHICH YOUR RELIGION IS EXPRESSED (Catholicism in Northampton may be expressed differently than Catholicism is expressed in Brazil), HOLIDAYS CELEBRATED, WHO YOU TALK TO OR ABOUT, etc.
- 5.) Next, ask participants to choose two of their own identities which are important to them. (At this point it is possible to do an extended variant in which you ask the participants to write these identities down, turn, and for three-four minutes share this info with a neighbor. Suggest that they help each other think of additional ways in which they express their identities as this can be a very subtle and unconscious process that we take for granted.)

6.) Inform the participants that a proclamation has been issued. Let them know that they have no choice but to abide by this proclamation. You could say that President Bush has issued an Executive Order. Failure to comply with the order will result in both forfeiture of the next two year's salary and all of one's retirement benefits. Or perhaps it is the Superintendent of their school system, and failure to comply would mean you're out of a job you desperately need. The proclamation is this: For the next twelve months, participants may not--in any way, shape, or form--express the two identities they have chosen today. They must hide all aspects of expression that would reveal either identity. (Participants may try to resist this piece of the exercise. It may be necessary to acknowledge that this is a difficult and uncomfortable task. Ask them to "dig deep.")

8.) Ask for responses to the question, "What would you do? (Write "DO" as the heading of column number three and "FEEL" as the heading of column number four.) Possibilities for this category include MOVE/LEAVE, REFUSE, or REBEL. These can be accepted and acknowledged as an understandable first response. But, ask them to move deeper. What if they have no choice but to comply, no power enabling them to move? What if they were eight years old? What if to refuse or rebel meant the possibility of death, at least the probability of harassment, violence, and discrimination? Further responses can include HIDE; ISOLATE, SEEK OUT LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE IN SECRET, DO OR BECOME THE OPPOSITE OF WHO I AM, CHANGE MY APPEARANCE, STAY AWAY FROM OTHERS LIKE ME IN PUBLIC, DENY MY IDENTITY, REPRESS MY FEELINGS, ISOLATE, etc. (It is possible to work on "DO" and "FEEL" at the same time. If you are getting limited responses go to the next part and work simultaneously on both.)

9.) Next, ask for responses to the question, "What would you feel? Responses can include SAD, ANGRY, LONELY, DEPRESSED (Here it is helpful to point out that anger turned inward becomes depression and depression can lead to suicide and other 'pre-suicidal'/risky behaviors. This can give you a few more items for the "Do" list such as ABUSE ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS, ENGAGE IN RISKY SEXUAL AND OTHER BEHAVIOR, COMMIT SUICIDE.), AFRAID, GUILTY, DESPERATE, UNWANTED, HATE YOURSELF, SUICIDAL, FRUSTRATED, RAGEFUL, DEFEATED, LIVING A LIE, etc.

10.) Next, prompt discussion by asking, "What does this exercise have to do with gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender youth or kids who have a loved one who is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender?" Participants often are very sobered by this exercise and must be coaxed to talk a little more. Point out that the Student Rights Law requires educators to assure that students have a safe, secure school environment conducive to getting a good education. Ask participants while pointing to the "DO" and "FEEL" columns, "How likely is it that a GLBT kid or someone who has a GLBT loved one will get a good education if she/he has to DO this and, as a result, FEELS this?"

11.) This is generally an excellent time to move into the statistics of the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey or other forms of statistics around risk behaviors.