



safe zone

Who needs it?

I went my entire first year at UNC ignoring Safe Zone training. I assumed that because I identified as LGBTIQ I already knew what I needed to know, and that “ally” training was meant to teach those with little or no knowledge that gay people existed. Yikes.

My excuse now is that I was a first year and was dealing with a lot of other issues...perhaps a poor excuse, but through my own initial ignorance and subsequent realizations I have come to understand why students may not see the importance of Safe Zone training or of being visible allies. Being an “ally” means so much more than “not having a problem with gay people”, but it might mean something a little different to each person. So whether or not you are LGBTIQ identified, whether you have no gay friends or fifty, it is important for you to be an ally.

In order to combat apathy we have taken a look at some of the reasons why students, faculty, and staff may feel as though Safe Zone Training is not for them. Though we don’t pretend to speak for the UNC campus and community as a whole, our experiences have revealed a few distinct similarities in the objections to becoming Safe Zone allies:

Fear. One fear is the misconception that one would be labeled as LGBTIQ (whether or not they identify this way) if they chose to become a visible Safe Zone Ally. In reality, Safe Zone training is unconnected with one’s sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression; its goal is to create a safer place for all people, regardless of how they identify.

Complacency. To be complacent is to be self-satisfied: Content with the current situation, unaware of some potential defect. To directly challenge this state of unaware contentment is a driving force of Safe Zone training. By providing information and dispelling myths, the ally training program is able to tear down the structures built on complacency and to rebuild a wider, sturdier foundation; a foundation upon which all people can stand. For example, in Safe Zone training the concept of heterosexism: the assumption and reinforcement that everyone does or should identify as heterosexual, is brought to the forefront of the conversation. This may be the first time someone has encountered the concept or the ways in which heterosexism interacts with other forms of oppression. This is just one of the ways Safe Zone training challenges the status-quo and is a catalyst for creating change in the community.

Indifference. Another reason for avoiding Safe Zone training could be simple indifference. Arguably, if not part of the solution, one is a direct part of the problem. Part of what makes indifference so strong is the idea that inaction (neutrality) is no better than harmful action.

Fear, complacency, and indifference: These are heavy words. They carry a lot with them, and all seem like pretty solid reasons for not becoming a visible ally. So how do we go about changing the minds of people stricken by fear? Content in complacency? Or utterly indifferent? The bad news is that if we knew how to counteract apathy we would not be faced with such discrimination, intolerance, and hate.

Almost any individual in the LGBTIQ community can tell you personal accounts of struggles they have faced as a result of their identities. Many may have suffered physical and/or sexual assault, bullying, harassment and threats. Others have been denied the rights of restroom access, of healthcare, and of equal protection under the law. Still more individuals have been the victims of the more subtle (but undeniably harmful) sexist and homophobic jokes, misidentification, and creation of an uncomfortable working environment.