

Beyond Normal: Anti-Stigma Work in LGBTQIA Communities

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Coming Out to My Dad

Figure 1. Rainbow Flag. "Rainbow Flag". Flickr User "Ludovic Bertron"
2008. Web.



What do we risk in coming out?

As much as we position “coming out” as a liberating process, we also risk **abandonment, isolation, abuse, and violence.**

For many (especially queer people of color), coming out can mean losing your only support systems.

My situation was no different.

I was especially terrified of coming out to my Dad.

It meant telling someone who **served as a naval chief** for 18 years that I'm gay.

It meant telling someone who used to **watch Fox News and Bill O'Reilly as a trusted news source** that I was gay.

The values my Dad held dear closely aligned to people who believe that I **should be punished for my sexuality.**

Figure 2. Naval Officers. *US Navy (Public Domain)*. 11 May 2015. Web.



Imagine if you had to come out
How would you want to be treated?

**Most people would want something along
the lines of**

“We still love you.

You’re still our kid.

Nothing has changed.”

My father told me this:

“I’m crying because I fear for you.

There is no going back now.

What happens if someone tries to hurt you?

What happens if you become HIV+?”

What happened?

Expectations

- We love you.
- Nothing has changed.
- You're still our kid.

Reality

- I fear for your safety.
- Your life has fundamentally changed.
- This society doesn't want you.

**Despite these two responses being
drastically different, they are
fundamentally the same.**

**Both are messages of
compassion and understanding**

Despite my initial confusion to my Dad's sobbing, his reasoning makes sense.

Despite what society tells me what the ideal "coming out" reaction should look like...

I would pick my Dad's reaction every time.

My Dad recognized a core part of coming out I forgot:

In our society, LGBTQIA people are not seen as first class citizens.

Those in my community are subject to violence, discrimination, and harm. This society wasn't designed with me or my people in mind.

Because of this, I am now more prone to loss of income, loss of health, homelessness, and death.

**In his own way, my Dad did what many
contemporary anti-stigma projects fail to do:**

**Acknowledge that structural oppression is very
much the reason why stigma exists in the first
place.**

Beyond Normalized Horizons

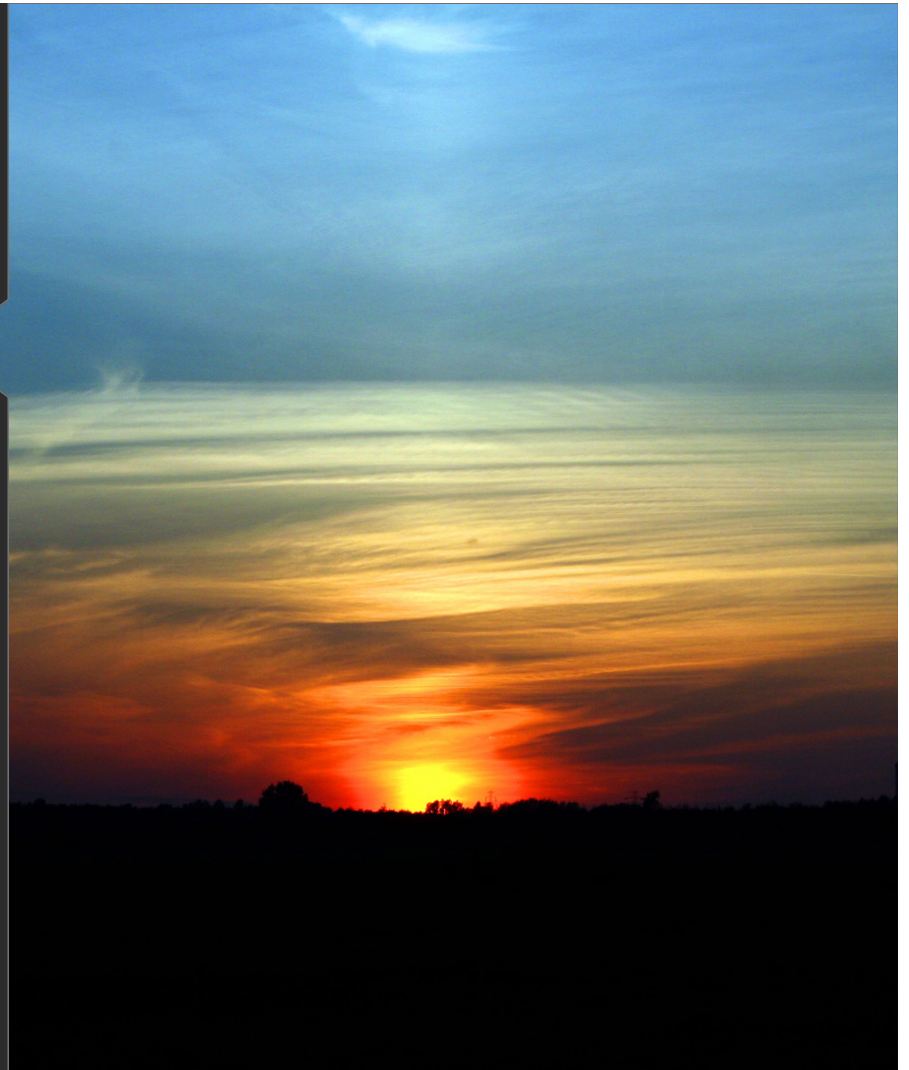


Figure 3. Evening sunset. Untitled. Adam Ziaja. 15 Sept 2006. Web.

Contemporary anti-stigma projects seeks
to **normalize identities and experiences.**

They seek to create an environment where
it is more acceptable (or desirable) to be
who you are.

**How is it possible to normalize an identity
or experience when our current social
structures lack the resources to help them?**

How will changing our language about the transgender community result in more employment opportunities with a living wage?

**How will switching from the term
“compliant” to “medically adherent”
address the fact that there is a lack of
public funding for drug assistance
programs?**

Reinterpreting Expressions of Love

Status Quo of Support

- We love you.
- Nothing has changed.
- You're still our kid.

Acknowledge Structural Inequalities

- I fear for your safety.
- Your life has fundamentally changed.
- This society doesn't not want you.

Intentions of Anti-Stigma Projects

Anti-Stigma Status Quo

- Your experience should be included.
- You're not alone in this.
- To educate and be aware.
- Eliminate negative associations as my own individual labor.

Stigma as a Social Symptom

- Histories of privilege and oppression have deemed your experience as sub-human.
- The failures of our infrastructure are the greatest threat to our well-being.

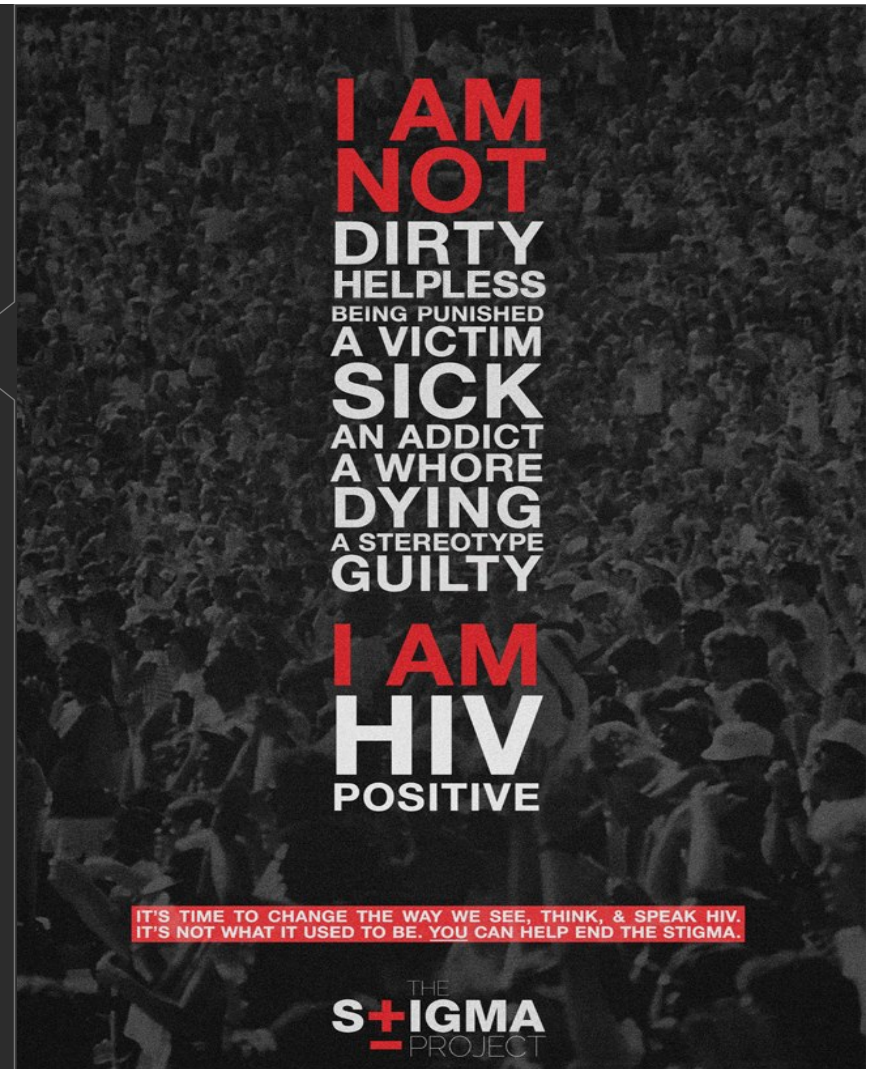
Current anti-stigma efforts closely resemble this.

Their end goal is to help public attitudes reimagine or detach an experience, a community, or a concept from negative associations.

In these approaches, stigma is viewed as **individual labor**.

Positioning stigma as an individual labor **displaces accountability** to the structural oppressions associated with such experiences, communities, or concepts.

Figure 3. HIV Stigma ad campaign. *The Stigma Project*. 12 August 2012. Web.



This is another example of an anti-stigma project authored by my own agency, Asian & Pacific Islander Wellness Center.

The intent of this quiz is to assess a person's current set of beliefs and see what stigmas they hold.

This places the source of stigma as something the individual creates.

What's missing in this project is acknowledging even if personal beliefs change, a person living with HIV will still struggle finding housing, affordable medication, or stable employment.

The struggle to obtain such things due to living with HIV is structural oppression.

Figure 4. HIV Stigma quiz. Asian & Pacific Islander Wellness Center. 15 March 2015. Web.

ARE YOU A STIGMATIZER? FIND OUT HERE



Listen to stories from people living with HIV and find out if you are a stigmatizer. Take a short quiz that includes tips and videos where you can see what people go through when living with HIV.

[Take the quiz](#)

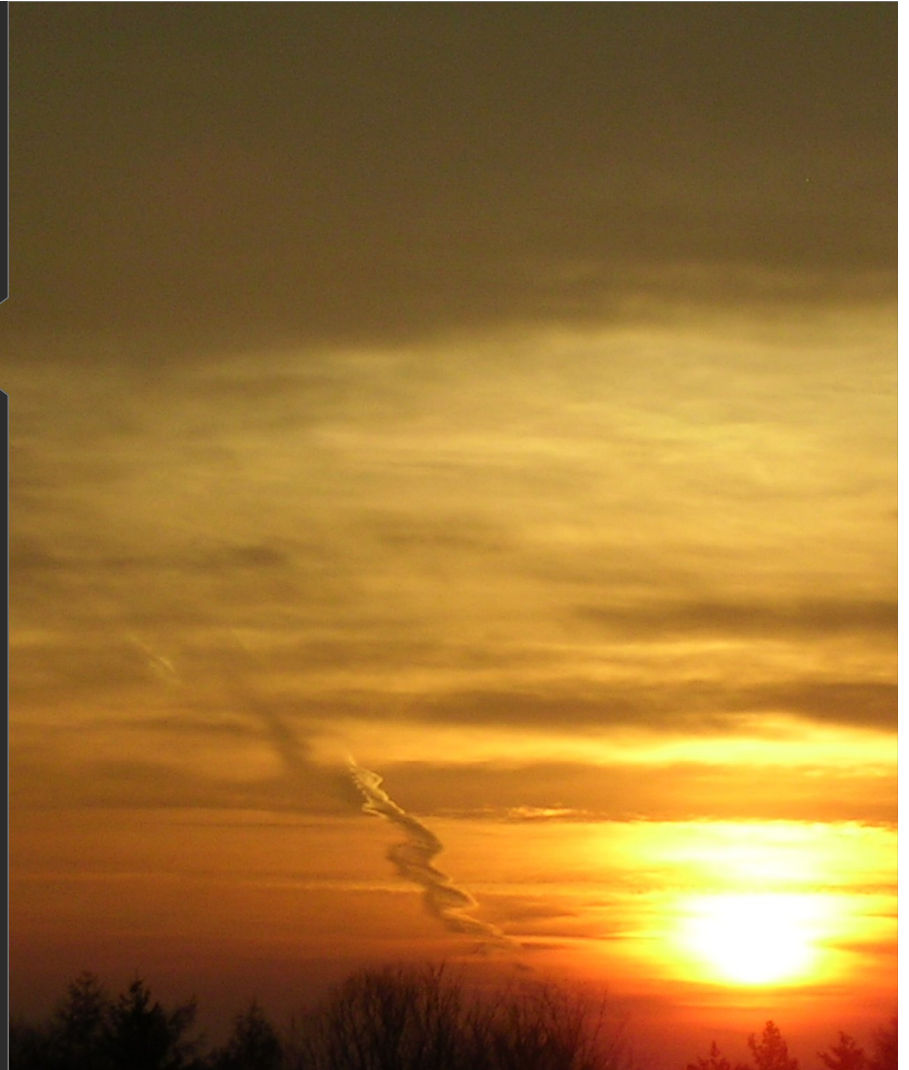
**Knowing this, how do we apply this
reimagining of anti-stigma work as
medical providers?**

**How many of us can name at least 3
shelters here in San Francisco?**

How many of us could readily refer a client to a medical case manager that's familiar with their culture?

Rising to Action

Figure 5. Sunrise. Untitled. *Simon Eugster*. 5 July 2006. Web.



API Wellness' Integrated Care Model

- My agency participates in both types of anti-stigma projects: **the individual labor of addressing personal stigma** and **addressing structural oppressions**.
- Projects like “The Banyan Tree Project” normalize conversations about HIV for the Asian American and Pacific Islander community (ie: **HIV does affect us and it is a concern for those we love. It's okay to talk about it**)
- **We address structural oppression two ways:** staff is trained in navigating San Francisco's social support systems and we have specialists co-located on-site for immediate triage.
- We also align ourselves with **social justice practices: we realize acquiring infection is proof of a system of racism, discrimination, and injustice.**

How Do We Rise to Anti-Stigma Work?

Our **anti-stigma labor** must recognize that certain identities, experiences, and communities are threatened daily by our societal structure.

If we are truly down for healing our communities, we need to be down to fight against tech companies gentrifying Market Street, Tenderloin, and The Mission, thus pushing out LGBTQIA people of color and increasing their chances of drug use and acquiring HIV.

We need to be down to fight against corporate interests like the Super Bowl that cause police officers to break apart tent cities in the SOMA and exacerbating health issues of the homeless.