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RICHIE FRIEMAN: Hello, and welcome to the Modern Manners Guy's, "Quick and Dirty Tips for a More Polite Life." This week, we'll go to a listener question for our topic. What is the best way to politely inform strangers, say on an airplane, or new acquaintances that you are gay, et cetera, when they make assumptions about your personal life? For example, assumptions about girlfriends.

I've learned to dodge the question and try to change the subject or just directly correct the person. It's often tricky and depends on the situation. Sometimes, I get the impression that people feel I am being rude when I correct their assumptions about me. Generally, it is not an issue I run into frequently, which makes it that much more awkward when the situation occurs. Thanks, Sean.

First of all, Sean, thanks so much for listening to the show and taking the time to write in with your question. Now, a few suggestions for dealing with strangers who ask questions about girlfriends. It's a doubly tough situation, because you must face the hazard of potential homophobia, as well as the uncomfortable situation of having to correct someone.

I suggest trying an approach where you don't have to correct someone in a way that could seem pedantic. This can be easier in situations where you have a boyfriend or partner, as then, you can just answer with something that's true. For example, if your seatmate asks what your girlfriend does for a living, you could say something like, oh, I have a boyfriend, and he's an astrophysicist.

If you are single, you could say something like, I'm single at the moment. My boyfriend and I broke up a few months ago. This approach might give you the opportunity to gently redirect your seat mate to the right track without making it seem like you're correcting him or her.

In terms of the issue of homophobia and intolerance, I wish we had a good solution for that. Sean also noted that his own experiences have made him more aware about making assumptions about other people. In addition to sexual orientation, we often make subtle or overt assumptions about race, religion, age, relationship status, and a host of other categories.

It is a good idea to run a filter through your head to see if your comments or questions might

put someone in an uncomfortable position. Ask yourself if you would feel comfortable saying the same thing to a very diverse audience of people containing Ethiopian lesbian rabbis, octogenarian Muslim lion tamers, et cetera. And if your answer is no, then you might want to rethink what you were about to say.

If you feel comfortable saying it to anyone, then you're probably in good shape to proceed. You should also apply a similar filter when questioning someone you don't know. Just consider if the question you were asking might make the person uncomfortable if she was different in terms of race, religion, et cetera, from the way you assumed she was.

And we do all make assumptions about people all the time. In the particular case of asking someone about their spouse, you may use more inclusive terms so as not to make someone feel uncomfortable because of a narrow assumption. You may ask something like, are you married or partnered? Or, do you have a significant other in your life? By asking in this way, you'll make it easier for people to give you an honest answer without feeling awkward or impolite.

So here's hoping that you only assume the best of other people. And thank you for listening to "Quick and Dirty Tips for a More Polite Life."

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