



INSPIRING INDIVIDUAL &
ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

LGBTQ+ Education



LGBTQ+ Terminology

Educate Yourself First

When learning to support LGBTQ+ workers, it's important to educate yourself first and a good place to start is with LGBTQ+ terminology.

One of the first things to do when attempting to be a better LGBTQ+ ally, or working toward creating a more inviting and inclusive space, is to educate oneself. It can be daunting to know what to do or how to behave when there's so much we don't know about a community. Thankfully the internet has a plethora of information to get you started. One of the best places to start when first learning about the LGBTQ+ community is with basic LGBTQ+ terminology.

These definitions are compiled from a more comprehensive list at [It's Pronounced Metrosexual](#). It was created in collaboration with [The Safe Zone Project](#) as well as a large number of community members. The Safe Zone Project is a great educational resource and we definitely recommend checking it out for yourself.

Note: definitions are always growing and changing with the community as cultural norms change. Also, not every member of the LGBTQ+ community personally identifies with the terms. So, always trust the person you're interacting with to self identify, and go with the definition they're comfortable with if they choose to explain or describe their identity to you.

LGBTQ+ TERMINOLOGY

(L)lesbian noun & adj. : Women who are primarily attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other women.

(G)gay 1 adj. : experiencing attraction solely (or primarily) to some members of the same gender. It can be used to refer to men who are attracted to other men and women who are attracted to women. 2 adj. : an umbrella term used to refer to the queer community as a whole, or as an individual identity label for anyone who is not straight.



(B)bisexual 1 noun & adj. : a person who experiences attraction to some men and women. 2 adj. : a person who experiences attraction to some people of their gender and another gender. Bisexual attraction does not have to be equally split or indicate a level of interest that is the same across the genders an individual may be attracted to. It can be shortened to “bi” (pronounced “bye”). Often used interchangeably with “pansexual”.

asexual adj. : experiencing little or no sexual attraction to others and/ or a lack of interest in sexual relationships/behaviour. Asexuality exists on a continuum from people who experience no sexual attraction or have any desire for sex, to those who experience low levels, or sexual attraction only under specific conditions. Many of these different places on the continuum have their own identity labels (ex: demisexual). Sometimes abbreviated to “ace.”

(T)transgender 1 adj. : a gender description for someone who has transitioned (or is transitioning) from living as one gender to another. 2 adj. : an umbrella term for anyone whose sex assigned at birth and gender identity does not correspond in the expected way (e.g., someone who was assigned male at birth, but does not identify as a man).

MORE SPECIFIC GENDER TERMINOLOGY – LGBTQ+ TERMINOLOGY

When it comes to gender, there are a few more definitions that might be helpful:

cisgender /“siss-jendur”/ – adj. : a gender description for when someone’s sex assigned at birth and gender identity correspond in the expected way (e.g., someone who was assigned male at birth, and identifies as a man). A simple way to think about it is if a person is not transgender, they are cisgender. The word cisgender can also be shortened to “cis.”

agender adj. : a person with no (or very little) connection to the traditional system of gender, no personal alignment with the concepts of either man or woman, and/or someone who sees themselves as existing without gender. Sometimes called gender neutrois, gender-neutral, or genderless.

gender fluid adj. : a gender identity best described as a dynamic mix of boy and girl. A person who is gender fluid may always feel like a mix of the two traditional genders but may feel more man some days, and more woman other days. Gender identity noun: the internal perception of one’s gender, and how they label themselves, based on how much they align or don’t align with what they understand their options for gender to be. Often conflated or confused with biological sex, or sex assigned at birth.



USING LANGUAGE APPROPRIATELY

Once we have a basic understanding of terminology, we need to know how to use it appropriately. Here are some of the common mistakes and how to avoid them.

1. **Say “gay,” not “homosexual.”** “Homosexual” often connotes a medical diagnosis and often causes discomfort with gay/lesbian people. For example, “We want to do a better job of being inclusive of our gay employees.”
2. **Say “assigned female at birth,” not “born female” or “female-bodied”** (or “assigned male at birth,” not “born male” or “male-bodied”). “Assigned” language accurately depicts the situation of what happens at birth. “-Bodied” language is often interpreted as pressure to medically transition, or invalidation of one’s gender identity. For example, “Max was assigned female at birth, then he transitioned in high school.”
3. **Say “a transgender person” or “a gay person,” not “a transgender” or “a gay.”** Gay and transgender are adjectives that describe a person/group. For example, “We had a transgender athlete in our league this year.”
4. **Say “transgender people and cisgender people,” not “transgender people and normal people.”** Saying “normal” implies “abnormal.” For example, “This group is open to both transgender and cisgender people.”
5. **Say “all genders,” not “both genders” or “opposite sexes.”** “Both” implies there are only two; “opposite” reinforces antagonism amongst genders. For example, “Video games aren’t just a boy thing — kids of all genders play them.”
6. **Say “everyone,” “folks,” “honoured guests,” etc., not “ladies and gentlemen.”** Moving away from binary language is more inclusive of people of all genders. For example, “Good morning everyone, next stop Picadilly Station.”
7. **Say “they,” not “it” when referring to someone** (e.g., when pronouns are unknown). “It” is for referring to things, not people. For example, “You know, I am not sure how they identify.”

For some, it may feel overwhelming at first to become accustomed to using LGBTQ+ terminology that you’re not familiar with. But with practice, it will become more natural and comfortable. Also note that mistakes and missteps happen, those in the LGBTQ+ community are generally understanding of this, especially if you show you’re putting in the effort to learn and correct mistakes.



How to Be a Good LGBTQ+ Ally

Educate Yourself First

Harassment of LGBTQ+ individuals at work is a significant contributor to mental health issues, so here we are going to talk about how to be a good LGBTQ+ ally to employees and co-workers.

LGBTQ+ individuals experience discrimination and harassment; this directly and negatively impacts their mental health, and LGBTQ+ adults are more than twice as likely to experience mental health conditions and are at higher risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviour. So, here we are going to talk about how to be a good LGBTQ+ ally regardless of whether or not you have individuals in your workplace who are out as queer.

Homophobic/queerphobic slurs are the biggest contributor to the harassment of LGBTQ+ people at work, and in general. Most of the time these slurs are used unconsciously and are not intended to be harmful. Though regardless of the intent these words do cause harm.

HOW TO BE A GOOD LGBTQ+ ALLY

So are some good places to start when it comes to being a good LGBTQ+ ally:

Start with Yourself

1. **Educate yourself on the LGBTQ+ community.** Knowledge is power, this not only helps you to have the information you need to approach LGBTQ+ people with respect, but it gives you the opportunity to support them through starting to educate others as with some of the examples below.
 - Consider checking out sites like TheSafeZoneProject for terminology, PFLAG a website for families and friends of LGBTQ+ people, or GLAAD, an organization devoted to shaping conversations about LGBTQ+ folks.
2. **Don't make assumptions.** Assumptions are typically based on stereotypes as well as conflate heterosexuality as the 'norm'. A simple change we can make to be more inclusive of LGBTQ+



people is to not make assumptions about gender identity based on the way someone looks as well as not assuming the gender of someone's partner.

In Interaction with Others

Not only is it important to educate oneself on the LGBTQ+ community and the issues they face, but it's important to make conscious efforts to be a supportive LGBTQ+ ally when interacting with others.

1. **Don't ever out someone.** If someone comes out to you that means they trust you, so don't break that trust by outing them to others.
2. **Be conscious of your language.** We form habits around the use of some words or phrases and sometimes forget the intent behind those words. For example; 'that's so gay'. Although this phrase is becoming less common, it used to be used to describe something that was seen as negative. Take a moment to think about how using phrases such as this could have a negative impact on people in the LGBTQ+ community.
3. **Don't let slurs slide in others.** Addressing others' use of slurs can be a bit more challenging. When addressing problematic language, consider the context of the situation, it may make more sense to bring it up with the person later rather than confronting them in public or in front of colleagues for example. Consider whether or not they are using the slur intentionally. If you're unsure, assume they're not, approach the situation calmly and explain that their use of language is offensive.
4. **Don't allow others to make queerphobic jokes.** Simply asking someone to explain the punchline of a problematic joke can help them to understand why it is problematic.
5. **Stand up for others.** This may look like standing up against harassment or bullying, this is particularly important in the workplace. But it can also mean ensuring that everyone is treated equally, for example; making sure that people are using the correct name and pronouns for someone.
6. **Make space for LGBTQ+ voices.** If you have LGBTQ+ individuals in your workplace, make sure you give them equal opportunity to participate in all discussions as well as asking their opinion on issues that directly impact them.

When you first start to learn about the LGBTQ+ community and how to be an advocate for your friends and co-workers it can feel a bit daunting. Don't worry, that's normal. There is a lot of diversity in the LGBTQ+ community and you are not going to gain a comprehensive understanding of the community overnight. But we all have to start somewhere, educating ourselves on the basics and being able to recognize problematic language and behaviour is a great place to start. Know that you don't have to be an expert to stand up and let



someone know that their words or behaviours are problematic. So, when it comes to being a good LGBTQ+ ally, the best place to start is with a good intention to do so.

Supporting LGBTQ+ People in the Workplace

Educate Yourself First

The people, our workers, are the heart of our businesses. So, it's important to foster safe and inclusive work environments for people of all backgrounds including those who are members of the LGBTQ+ community.

LGBTQ+ individuals experience discrimination and harassment in the workplace. This directly and negatively impacts LGBTQ+ individuals' mental health. So, when talking about workplace mental health, we need to pay special attention to groups, like the LGBTQ+ community, to actively work against this treatment to create psychologically safe spaces for all individuals. So here we are going to talk about supporting LGBTQ+ people in the workplace.

FACTS ABOUT LGBTQ+ WORKERS

The LGBTQ+ community has higher rates of unemployment, with rates spiking even higher for trans and nonbinary people. But unemployment is not the only issue. A U.K. report, one of the first of its kind, found that 7 in 10 LGBTQ+ people have been sexually harassed at work and two-thirds did not report it to their employer. The Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy found 15% to 43% of gay and transgender workers faced some sort of workplace discrimination in the U.S. Though it is important to note that the experience of discrimination and harassment is not consistent across the queer community:

- ❖ LGBTQ+ people of colour are more than twice as likely to experience discrimination in the workplace as their white peers.
- ❖ LGBTQ+ women experience sexual harassment at higher rates than men.
- ❖ 90% of transgender workers have experienced harassment or mistreatment at work.



Many organizations have come to understand the experiences that LGBTQ+ individuals face in the workplace and have created specific policies to be more inclusive. Some of these include: healthcare coverage for same-sex spouses; protocols for gender transition; and paid parental leave for same-sex couples and adoptive parents.

INCLUSIVE WORKSPACES – SUPPORTING LGBTQ+ PEOPLE IN THE WORKPLACE

Though creating inclusive workplace policies is a great first step, it is just that – a first step. Workplace policies are not enough on their own to create safe and inclusive workplace environments and culture. So, what can companies and colleagues do to create a safe and inviting workplace for members of the LGBTQ+ community?

1. **Educate yourself on the LGBTQ+ community**, both individually and as an organization. A great place to start is with Basic LGBTQ terminology. And here are some other great resources (The Safe Zone Project: <http://thesafezoneproject.com/> PFLAG: <https://pflag.org/GLAAD>: <http://www.glaad.org/about>)
 - This should also include company training/workshops as well as providing information to new hires as well as new managers/leaders.
2. Make sure **company policies are up to date and use inclusive language**.
3. **Create hiring initiatives that encourage LGBTQ+ applicants**, whenever possible.
4. **Have peer support networks for mental health**, such as mental health ambassadors, and ensure all workers know how to get support for mental health at work. It's also important to create a culture where individuals feel able to seek out that support.
5. **Don't make assumptions**. Most people unconsciously make the assumption that others are similar to them. This means that heterosexual cis-gender people will automatically think the same of their co-workers which puts LGBTQ+ individuals in the awkward position of correcting others. So, do not assume someone's gender or pronouns based on how they present themselves and do not assume the gender of anyone's partner.
6. **Lead by example**. Like introducing yourself with your name and pronouns, this can help reduce the instances of people making assumptions about gender and pronouns, as well as make transgender and non-binary people feel less uncomfortable when telling people their pronouns.
7. **Take action when discrimination or harassment does occur**. Remind others that making jokes at the expense of someone in the LGBTQ+ community is not accepted and will not be tolerated. Even using a phrase like "that's so gay" is not acceptable and this type of behaviour should be called out.



Remember that inclusive businesses, with a satisfied workforce, is a more successful business.

SUPPORTING LGBTQ+ CO-WORKERS

Oftentimes when we find out a co-worker is part of the LGBTQ+ community, we want to show our support but don't know the best way to do so. What are some, potentially well-meaning, things that shouldn't be done in the workplace when it comes to LGBTQ+ co-workers?

1. **Don't ask a bunch of questions.** Many questions are well-meaning but can be hurtful, make people feel uncomfortable, and they often require a significant amount of emotional energy for the person being asked. There are also many instances where the workplace is not an appropriate setting for these questions.
2. **Don't out someone at work.** Just because they have told you how they identify, does not mean they are out to everyone in the workplace. They likely came out to you because they trust you – so maintain that trust.
3. **Don't play matchmaker.** When well-meaning straight people try to set someone up, it is typically simply based on the fact that they happen to know someone else is gay (or however they identify). This not only ignores the many other factors that go into dating but in most cases makes people uncomfortable.

Supporting LGBTQ+ people in the workplace doesn't have to be challenging. Start with good intentions on fostering an inclusive space, educate yourself on the LGBTQ+ community and the issues they face in the workplace and do what you can to create that safe space. Ensure policies are updated and followed, lead by example and train workers within your organization.

Questions Not to Ask LGBTQ+ Co-Workers

Educate Yourself First

Members of the LGBTQ+ community are regularly asked questions about their identity. So before you ask them a question, particularly in the workplace setting, take the time to consider these things.



As we learn about the queer community and the diversity of people within the community, it's natural to want to know more. The number of recognized identities is growing and it can seem intimidating and complicated to those who are not part of the LGBTQ+ community. It's a great thing to be eager and willing to learn, and education is an important part of creating a more safe and inclusive environment for everyone. You might know someone who identifies within the LGBTQ+ community and figure they're the best person to ask those burning questions. They might be, but they also may not. So, let's talk about asking questions with particular attention to questions not to ask LGBTQ+ co-workers.

WHAT TO CONSIDER BEFORE ASKING QUESTIONS

Before asking questions consider a few things:

- **Is this something you could educate yourself on?** If you haven't already attempted to look up the answer, do that first.
- **Is the person you want to ask the appropriate person to ask?** Consider the relationship you have with that person. A close friend or family member is likely the most appropriate person to ask, rather than an acquaintance or co-worker.
- **Consider the context.** Is it the right time or place to be asking this question? Ideally, if you want to learn something about the queer community, a question should be asked at a time when the person is able to give an appropriately in-depth response and they're in a comfortable atmosphere to have that conversation. The workplace is likely not the place to be asking these questions.

GET CONSENT FIRST

It's important to not only be cautious of who you're asking, but also the questions you ask. It's equally as important to ask for consent before asking a question. Asking for consent can be as simple as "can I ask you a question about X?" and waiting for an answer. It's also important to be prepared to hear and respect the answer 'no'.



QUESTIONS NOT TO ASK LGBTQ+ CO-WORKERS

You may be thinking, *how do I know whether or not a question is appropriate to ask?* So here is a list of things to consider, as well as explanations as to why questions can be challenging to receive for those in the LGBTQ+ community.

1. Many of the well-meaning questions are hurtful or make people feel uncomfortable. For example; “What’s your type?” “So is it a he or a she?” “Who’s the guy and who’s the girl?” “So what’s your *real* name?”
2. People in the LGBTQ+ community get a lot of questions. It takes a lot of emotional energy to educate people, and it can feel even more exhausting when asked the same, or similar, questions particularly if that information could be found online.
3. Often questions don’t have a straightforward answer. Gender and sexuality are complicated and exist along a spectrum. People in the LGBTQ+ community are changing expectations of how humans look and act based on preconceived notions about gender, as well as changing the dynamic of how romantic relationships should look like. So, even if they want to encourage your learning they may not have the ability to answer a question for you in a way that makes sense without all the background knowledge of queer history.

The workplace is most likely not the best setting to be asking personal questions about a person’s identity. So, consider the appropriateness of timing and context when thinking about asking questions of LGBTQ+ co-workers.

If you’re motivated to learn more about the LGBTQ+ community consider checking out sites like [TheSafeZoneProject](#) for terminology, [PFLAG](#) a website for families and friends of LGBTQ+ people, or [GLAAD](#), an organization devoted to shaping conversations about LGBTQ+ folks.

Gender and Pronouns in the Workplace

How to be Gender Inclusive

When creating inclusive workplaces for LGBTQ+ individuals, it’s important to pay specific attention to gender and pronoun use in the workplace.



Many organizations have come to understand the experiences LGBTQ+ individuals face in the workplace and have created specific policies to be more inclusive. Some of these include: healthcare coverage for same-sex spouses; protocols and medical coverage for gender transition; and paid parental leave for same-sex couples as well as adoptive parents. Although creating workplace policies is a great first step, it's important for these policies to be enacted appropriately by managers as well as employees to create a safe and inclusive workplace for transgender individuals. So, let's talk specifically about gender and pronouns in the workplace.

FACTS ABOUT GENDER AT WORK

Approximately 90% of transgender workers have experienced harassment or mistreatment at work. And forty-seven percent of workers have experienced an adverse job outcome because they are transgender. This includes:

- ❖ Forty-four percent were passed over for a job.
- ❖ Twenty-three percent were denied a promotion.
- ❖ And 26 percent were fired because they were transgender.

GENDER AND PRONOUNS IN THE WORKPLACE – CREATING A SAFE WORKPLACE FOR TRANSGENDER FOLKS

So, what can companies and colleagues do to create a safe work environment for transgender individuals?

1) Start by educating ourselves about the use of pronouns.

In school, we're taught about the use of pronouns in a binary manner: he/she for individuals, and they/them for plural. But this language needs to be updated to include the use of they/them pronouns. They/them pronouns are used for individuals who identify as non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid or whoever chooses to use them.



2) Do not make assumptions about what pronouns a person uses.

Just because someone presents a particular way, does not mean they use the pronouns we assume they do. It can be helpful to practice using they/them pronouns and defaulting to using they until you find out what pronouns a person uses.

3) If you're unsure of someone's pronouns, ask.

Try one of these options: “Hey, what are your pronouns?”, “What pronouns do you use?”, “I was just wondering how you'd like me to address you.”, “I just want to make sure I'm using the correct language to refer to you.”

- ❖ Note: Avoid language around preference, pronouns are not a preference they're a requirement.
- ❖ Also note: Only asking people who appear to be transgender can in itself be problematic so get in the habit of asking everyone.

4) Start with yourself.

An even easier way to start a conversation about pronouns is to start with yourself, especially if you are cisgender. Cisgender is a person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth, i.e. assigned male at birth and continue to identify as male and use he/him pronouns, or vice versa. If you need/want to learn more about general LGBTQ+ terminology, check out our other article [here](#).

Do this by introducing yourself with your name and pronouns, then give the other person the opportunity to do so as well. For example, I would say, “Hi, I'm Dr. Joti Samra, I use she/her pronouns.”

- ❖ Doing this in a group setting where everyone states their name and pronouns, regardless of gender identity, can help to make the experience less tokenizing for trans people. In the workplace, this can be done with ice breaker activities that include everyone introducing themselves with their pronouns as well as their name.
- ❖ It's a good approach to give pronouns first, so it's not required for others to ask or make the wrong assumptions. In the workplace, pronouns can be added to profiles and other public spaces – for example in email signatures, in profiles such as slack or other company communication programs, on name tags during events, etc.



5) *Names are incredibly important.*

Not every trans person has legally changed their name. So it's important they're able to use their chosen name at work and that name is respected. Not only should this name be used by their managers and colleagues, but they should be able to use this name in documentation like work emails and business cards.

6) *Be aware of gendered language.*

Pronouns aren't the only important aspects of gendered language. Some examples of regularly used gendered language include "Good Morning, ladies!" or "you guys". Even using phrases we may think are more inclusive like "ladies and gentlemen" can be problematic. It's important to be conscious of language and the assumptions we are making based on that language. Often the language we think is inclusive isn't due to the fact that it doesn't include anyone who falls outside of the binary.

Here are some examples of more gender-inclusive language:

- ❖ Instead of "you guys," try "you all," "y'all," "folks," "friends," "everyone," "people".
- ❖ Instead of "dude," "man," and "bro," well, how about just ditch those, no replacement necessary?
- ❖ Rather than "ladies and gentlemen," try "everyone," "folks," or nothing at all.
- ❖ Instead of "men and women," try "people," "employees," or "workers".
- ❖ Rather than "sir" and "ma'am," try nothing at all.

OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS TO NOTE ABOUT GENDER IN THE WORKPLACE

Gender and pronoun use in the workplace is an important part of creating a safe and inclusive environment. Here are some things that may come up as you learn about gender identity and appropriate pronoun use so you can avoid some simple mistakes.

1. **Trans people aren't required to disclose information about their identities.** And even more importantly, they're *not* required to do the labour of educating us on the shortcomings of our understanding of gender. Depending on our relationship with them, it can feel tokenizing and exhausting to trans people to constantly have to answer questions about their gender identity. Also, the workplace, in most cases, is likely not an appropriate place to be asking these questions. Remember it's important to educate ourselves first.
2. **Don't ask them to speak on behalf of the entire community.** Every voice in the trans community represents an entirely different experience from the next.



3. If we find ourselves misgendering someone, **never make it about you.**
 - It's OK to make mistakes. But make sure to immediately recognize and acknowledge you used the wrong pronouns and correct it. Otherwise, other people involved in that conversation might think they can also use the wrong pronouns for that person.
 - Don't get upset with ourselves or overly apologetic. The most respectful thing we can do in that situation is to acknowledge our mistake, fix it and carry on.
 - **If we see someone else misgender a person, don't stand idly by.** Politely correct them and move on.
4. **Never argue with someone about the grammatical use of the singular they pronoun.** They is grammatically correct and we are required to learn how to use it appropriately.

Learning to be more gender-inclusive can feel daunting because it seems as though there is so much to learn. And for many of us, the learning process must begin with unlearning our ideas about gender and the gender binary. But gender and pronouns in the workplace is an important part of creating a safe and inclusive work environment for all workers. So, it's important to educate ourselves and our teams as well as continue to practice with inclusive language.

If you're still struggling with gender and pronouns in the workplace, whether with your own education, educating your workers or with specific workplace policies consider a consultation with [MyWorkplaceHealth](#).



How to Use Pronouns Correctly

How to be Gender Inclusive

Learning how to use pronouns correctly is an important part of creating gender-inclusive workplaces. Learn from our copywriter Emory's experience as a trans man.

As transgender individuals become more prevalent in the media, and celebrities and other prominent figures in social media are coming out as transgender, issues surrounding trans rights are more widely discussed. One of the first topics that's discussed is a person's pronouns and how to use pronouns correctly.

THE IMPORTANCE OF USING THE CORRECT PRONOUNS

When a person first comes out as transgender, one of the first things they're likely to explore themselves (and/or request of you) is the use of a different pronoun.

I'm a transgender male and use the pronouns he/him/his or they/them/theirs. I've been out as transgender for five years and started my medical transition three years ago (when I started taking testosterone). Accurate pronoun use is always important, but it can be particularly important during the first few stages of transition because it helps a person feel validated in their gender as well as accepted.

When someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric (often all of the above).

One of the first questions cisgender people generally ask when the topic of pronouns is brought up is; *how am I supposed to know which pronouns to use?*

Know this is an okay question to consider, but before we jump into the answer and tips on how to use pronouns correctly let's talk a bit about the history of gender and pronouns.



(If you don't know what the term cisgender means, or dysphoria, or some of the other terms I may be using throughout this piece consider checking out this resource from [It's pronounced metrosexual](#) on LGBTQ+ terms)

THE GENDER BINARY

For most of us, when we were children we thought pronouns were simple. Those we viewed as boys used “he/him/his” pronouns and those we viewed as girls used “she/her/hers”. But in recent years we’ve realized we need to update our view on gender identity.

Our old views of gender, and subsequently pronoun use, was based on the outdated idea of there being a gender binary and having every person fit at one end or the other (women or man). But gender is not this simple- there are many people who identify outside of this gender binary and identify as gender non-conforming or non-binary or something else.

There are many ways to exist outside of the gender binary as well as a vast number of ways to express gender. Often, but not always, these individuals chose to use gender-neutral pronouns. A commonly used gender-neutral pronoun is they/them/theirs, but others chose to use a different pronoun like “ze”.

So, back to that question; *how am I supposed to know what pronoun to use?*

The best thing you can do is ask!

TIPS ON HOW TO USE PRONOUNS CORRECTLY

The first thing to remember is to not make assumptions. Gender identity and gender expression are not the same things! So, do not assume someone's pronouns by the way they look. Also, consider for a minute what non-binary looks like. (The correct answer is you can't. If you did picture a particular type of individual take a second to question those ideas and where they came from. Non-binary doesn't mean androgynous).

The best way to find out what pronouns someone uses is to ask them. It may feel uncomfortable, so here are some suggestions on other ways to determine what pronouns someone uses: (*note: in the meantime default to using someone's name if you don't know what pronouns they use*).

- ❖ Pay attention in conversation and note the pronouns someone else uses for this person. Ideally, it would be someone who knows them well enough to know their pronouns, not a person who is making an assumption.



- ❖ When you introduce yourself to a new person introduce yourself with your pronouns and it will prompt the other person to do so as well. For example; when I introduce myself to someone new I say “Hi, my name is Emory I use he/him pronouns” (yes you can, and should, do this even if you’re cisgender because it not only makes transgender people feel accepted and included but makes it more comfortable for them to share their pronouns).

Once you know someone’s pronouns, it is important to use them- **always**.

If you’re struggling with using someone’s pronouns, take the time to practice; in the mirror, or with another friend. Practice using the correct pronoun paired with the person’s name. This can be particularly helpful with gender-neutral pronouns that feel unnatural at first. If you’re struggling with gender-neutral pronouns, MyPronouns.org is a great resource.

WHAT IF I MAKE A MISTAKE?

Mistakes happen, you are at some point likely to make a mistake when using someone’s pronouns, **that is okay**. As a trans person, I even sometimes make mistakes.

The most important thing when you make a mistake is to not make a big deal about it. Simply apologize, correct yourself, and move on. For example:

“Max was riding her bike- sorry I mean his bike to work when I saw him.”

When you make a big deal about a mistake and apologize profusely, it not only draws attention to the person if they’re present and makes them uncomfortable, but it puts them in a position where they feel the need to manage your feelings. This means they often feel obligated to tell you it’s ‘not a big deal’ or something similar to comfort you. That’s not their job.

In short, don’t make the mistake about you.

If you realize after the fact that you made a mistake, apologize in private and again move on.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I hope now that you know how to use pronouns correctly, doing so isn’t as scary or challenging as you originally thought. All it really takes is good intentions and breaking down your assumptions about gender.



Remember that presentation doesn't equal gender identity and that it's a privilege to not have to think about pronouns or have to correct people on your pronouns.

Originally published by Emory Oakley. Emory is a writer and LGBTQ+ educator who regularly discusses the intersections of queer identities and mental health.

