

Gender Identity: Understanding Basic Terms

1st June 2021

Gender identity has expanded over the decades from the mainstream view that gender identity is a simple binary that corresponds to a person's biological sex. Instead, it is more understood that gender identity is the way a person identifies themselves. This article will provide some basic definitions of terms you may have heard and give helpful links to resources that you can use to educate yourself further about gender identity.

What does gender identity mean?

The advocacy group [GLAAD](#) provides some helpful definitions:

Gender identity is a person's internal and personal sense of how they identify themselves as being male, female, gender fluid, gender neutral, or gender non-binary. A person's gender identity may not match the biological gender they were assigned at birth.

Transgender is a term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the biological sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender is an adjective, and not a noun. For example, you would say "they are transgender" rather than "they are a transgender."

You may hear transgender people describe themselves as transgender, transsexual (this is an older term), non-binary, gender fluid, or other terms. Take note and use their preferred definition. More terms are available in the [GLAAD Media Reference Guide](#). You can also read more about transgender people on the site for [PFLAG Canada](#).

Cisgender a person whose gender identity and the biological sex they were assigned at birth matches. Identifying as cisgender has nothing to do with sexual orientation.

Transitioning

Transitioning is the process by which a person makes physical changes to reflect their gender identity. For example, a person who was born with male genitalia and identifies as female would transition and likely refer to themselves as a transgender woman or a trans women.

Although medical intervention is not necessary to transition, some people elect to take hormones prescribed by a doctor. Others may choose to undergo gender reassignment

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surgery, also referred to as gender confirmation surgery.

Just as many of us may not be comfortable sharing our medical histories, it is not appropriate to ask a transgender person whether they have undergone surgery or are taking hormones. It's also important to remember that you should not make an assumption about a person's gender based on their appearance.

The difference between gender identity and sexual orientation

Being transgender relates to a person's gender identity. Your sexual orientation reflects who you are attracted to. A transgender person can identify as being gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, queer, asexual, or pansexual (a person who is not limited in sexual and/or romantic choices related to biological sex, gender identity, or gender expression).

Pronouns and names

How people refer to themselves is an important part of their identity. Using a person's preferred pronoun and name show courtesy and respect no matter what their gender identity.

Pronouns

A transgender person may choose to use pronouns he/him, she/her, they/their, or other combinations. Take their lead and make sure to use the same. If you do not know someone's preferred pronouns, GLAAD suggests prompting the question by saying something like, "Hi I'm Alex, and I use the pronouns he and him. What about you?" You can also listen to how someone who knows the person well describes them.

If you accidentally use the wrong pronoun or name, apologize and move on.

Names

Learn and use the name that the transgender person currently uses. Don't ask a transgender person their "real" name. If someone wants to share their birth name with you, they will volunteer that information on their own.

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More information about transgender awareness is available from [Tips for Allies of Transgender People](#) and [Transgender FAQ](#).

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