Transgender Etiquette

You don't have to be a member of the transgender community to learn what being transgender means. You may have a friend, family member, or co-worker who is transgender or transitioning, or would simply like to have a better understanding of how to be respectful to someone who is transgender.

Transgender: What is it?

Whether you already consider yourself an ally or you are beginning to educate yourself about the transgender community, it's important to understand some basic definitions.

Transgender: A term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. The term transgender should be used as an adjective, not as a noun. Do not say, "Chris is a transgender," or "There are a lot of transgenders here." Instead say, "Chris is a transgender person," or "There are a lot of transgender people here." Do not use slang to refer to a transgender person as much of this is considered derogatory or offensive.

Transsexual: A term "preferred by some people who have permanently changed—or seek to change—their bodies through medical interventions" (GLAAD Media Reference Guide). Do not assume that just because a person is transgender that they are transsexual or wish to have genital surgery. There are many options to the journey and life of a transgender person.

Gender identity: A person's internal, personal sense of being a man or a woman (or boy or girl). For transgender people, the sex they were assigned at birth and their own internal gender identity do not match. It is also important to know that for some people, their gender identity does not fit neatly into man or woman or boy or girl.

Non-binary: A term that someone may use if they "experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the categories of man and woman" (GLAAD Media Reference Guide). It's important to know a person who is transgender may or may not identify as non-binary, and you should only refer to someone as non-binary if they identify this way.

People in the transgender community may describe themselves using one (or more) of a wide variety of terms, including (but not limited to) transgender, transsexual, non-binary, agender, and third gender. When in doubt, always use the term that the person you are speaking to or referring to uses to describe themselves.

Is being transgender a choice?

The simple answer to that question is no. People do not decide to become a different gender any more than they decide how they want to look.

Be respectful of boundaries and always approach transgender individuals with respect and care. You should never ask someone transgender when they "chose" to become a boy or girl. Think of it this way: When did you choose your gender?

How can I be respectful?

Educating yourself

If you are concerned that you don't know how to be polite to a transgender person, it is important that you take ownership over your lack of understanding. Do your own research. Find an online suggested reading list and check out as many books as you can.

While it is okay to ask for clarification if there is something you don't understand, don't expect the transgender and nonbinary people in your life to be your sole text. If you do ask questions, be respectful of the person you are speaking to and their boundaries in the same way you would wish to be approached when asked about a very personal issue in your life.

Most transgender people will be happy to answer most questions as long as you are polite and the questions aren't inappropriate. Just keep in mind what is and isn't appropriate. For example, it is certainly appropriate to ask them what name they are using but asking about how they have sex is certainly never appropriate, just as it wouldn't be appropriate with anyone else.

Names and pronouns

Always refer to a transgender person by the name they prefer to be. If you happen to refer to the transgender person by their former name, simply correct the name in the rest of the conversation. However, know that it can be dangerous in some areas to call a transgender person by their former name. Transgender hate crimes are still an unfortunate part of society, so it is important to be aware of who may be listening to your conversation.

The same principles stand when it comes to pronouns. If the person you are addressing or referring to presents themselves as a woman, then address that person as a woman. If the person is presenting as a man, then consider that person a man. If you mistakenly use the wrong pronoun, don't apologize too much. Just follow the mistake with the right term and continue what you were saying.

Sexual Preference

Gender is not the same as sexuality. For example, a male who transitions to female (MTF) and likes other females is lesbian, a female who transitions to male (FTM) and likes other men is gay, and a MTF or FTM person may consider themselves straight if they are attracted to the opposite sex.

Assuming that all transgender people are sexually attracted to the opposite gender is no different than assuming that the only people who are attracted to women sexually are men.

Surgery

A transgender individual may choose to undergo any number of surgical options or medical interventions. However, not having any particular surgery does not make anyone less transgender and does not make them any less of their gender.

Do not ask about surgeries or plans for surgeries unless you are in the medical field and the person you are speaking to is your patient. In those cases, keep your questions pertinent to the person's medical needs. Asking personal questions because you're curious can cause a fear of judgement and make your patient nervous to seek future medical care.

Privacy

Many transgender people are not "out" or are out only to a small group of people, so please do not out them. When a transgender person tells you of their transgender status, they are entrusting you with their story. If you out them then you are betraying their trust.

Resources

If you are interested in learning more about the transgender community, you may find these resources helpful.

The Canadian Centre for Gender & Sexual Diversity

The Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health (CPATH)
GLAAD
The Trevor Project
Trans Lifeline
Trans Student Educational Resources

If you're looking for local resources, the Canadian Aids Society has a list of resources divided by province and territory.

This article was developed in collaboration with Tristan Byrnes, LMHC, Supervisor Immediate Support Counsellor for LifeWorks.

© LifeWorks 2023

LifeWorks
WellBeing Experts