

Transgender 101

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When you come across a new idea, it can be confusing about how to approach it. An idea that is new to many people is the idea of being transgender. This seems new, because it's being talked about a lot now, but trans people have actually been around for as long as all people have been around!

So what does it mean? When we're born, almost all of us are put into the category of 'male' or 'female', based on what our bodies look like. For most people, this ends up fitting how they feel about themselves, but for some people, it doesn't.

A person whose gender matches what they were labelled, or 'assigned' at birth is called 'cisgender', or 'cis'. 'Cis' means 'on the same side of'.

A person whose gender doesn't match what they were assigned at birth is called 'transgender', or 'trans'. 'Trans' means 'across'. Transgender people can be male, female, or non-binary.

For example:

When Bob was born, he was assigned 'male' - his doctors and caregivers called him a boy. Growing up, he felt like a boy. Bob is a cisgender man.

When Rashida was born, she was also assigned 'male'. Growing up, that didn't fit, and she felt like a girl. Rashida is a transgender woman.

When Ali was born, they were assigned 'female', but that didn't fit. Ali doesn't feel like a boy, either. Ali is non-binary.

Gay and Trans: What's the difference?

Transgender people fall into the LGBTQA+ community, so it can be easy to think that they are the same thing, but being trans is different to being gay or bisexual. Being straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or asexual is a person's sexuality. Being a man or woman (cis or trans) is a person's gender identity.

For example: A lesbian woman is a woman who is attracted to women. A straight man is a man attracted to women. Who someone is attracted to does not affect their gender. A good way to think of it is that sexuality is who you go to bed with, and gender is who you go to bed as.

So how do you talk to a trans person?

A lot of people feel worried about talking to a trans person. They're worried about offending them. This is totally normal. None of us are born knowing any of this stuff, and we are all learning all the time. We all mess up. You will mess up. Even trans people mess up. That's ok. The most important thing is to have good intentions, correct yourself quickly, and move on.

The most important thing is using correct names and correct pronouns.

Pronouns are words we use instead of a person's name. For example:

Bob and Rashida went out. It was Rashida's birthday, so Bob bought *her* lunch, and Rashida thanked *him*.

'He', 'she', and 'they' are gendered pronouns. For trans people, these are a really important way of acknowledging gender. If you don't know someone's pronouns, it's always better to ask than to assume. Even better still is to introduce yourself with the pronouns you use.

For example: My name is Charlie, and my pronouns are he/him. Nice to meet you!

This is a really great way to make talking about pronouns normal. If you find out, or know, a person uses a name different from their original name, it is very important not to ask about their 'real name'. As with anyone else, you should always call someone the name they give you, even if you know they have, or used to have, a different name. You wouldn't insist on referring to a Nick as Nicholas because it was the name on their birth certificate.

If you knew a person before they affirmed their gender, you should always use the person's current name and pronouns, unless you have the knowledge that the person is ok with you using their old name and pronouns.

Asking questions, surgery, and medicine

A lot of talk in the media around trans people is about medical and surgical changes they have made. The thing is, not all trans people have, want, or need, hormones or surgery, and even for those who do, it often is very uncomfortable to be asked.

Unless there is a medical reason for you to be asking about what a person's body looks like, or you are about to have sex with someone, and you want to know how to be respectful, it is not appropriate to ask about a person's medical or surgical history, especially if you don't know them!

The same as for everyone - it's not considered polite to ask about a person's private medical history, their genitals, or their sex life, in everyday conversation.

It's normal to be curious, but it is also very important to respect a person's privacy. If you want to know about the medical side of being transgender, there are some great resources on the internet!

This is a very, very short introduction to a lot of complicated information. It is a starting point. All trans people are different, and one person cannot speak for all, but our desire to be respected and seen for who we are is something we all feel.

