

PRIMER ON TRANS- INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE



Language matters. When it comes to describing aspects of social or cultural identity, the words we use have the power to affirm or deny a person's truth about who they are. Whether intentional, as in the case of blatant hate speech or name-calling, or unintentional, as in the case of microaggressions, words can have an effect on a person's sense of safety or wellbeing. Many people are still unfamiliar with or confused by transgender people, their identities, and their experiences. As a result, trans people are subject to harmful or inaccurate speech quite frequently in their everyday lives.

This primer aims to help the reader examine ways in which language and communication can help create a trans-inclusive environment. This is not the first resource providing information about trans-inclusive/respectful language or ally/accomplice behavior. I have compiled a summary of concepts from a number of excellent resources that aim to improve cultural competence, sensitivity, and inclusion for trans people. The intended audience is medical providers, therapists, educators, employers, friends and family members of trans people, or anyone else seeking to develop respectful behavior.

This is not about political correctness—this is not about right or wrong. This is not about policing language or threatening the right to freedom of speech. This is about encouraging the use of culturally inclusive language that does not further harm or alienate people whose experiences or mere existences are already denied, marginalized, or criminalized. Thoughtfulness in choosing our words, even small changes, can make a world of a difference in helping someone else to feel safe, welcome, and affirmed.

Language is always evolving, and the preferred terminology related to gender identity and descriptions of trans people has changed significantly over the past few decades. What is affirmative for some may not be for others. Keep in mind that what you may consider the “right” terminology may be aligned with the global north’s imposition, and that some terms that have fallen out of favor in some contexts are still considered acceptable in others. However, this basic primer provides information and examples that demonstrate what is considered appropriate or welcoming by many members of trans communities.

Another thing to keep in mind is that some people consider themselves to be trans, some nonbinary, and some both (or neither). For the purposes of this document, the term trans will be used most often but is meant to be broad and inclusive.

Allies and accomplices are important in any movement for liberation. An ally is not someone who doesn’t make mistakes, but rather someone who makes mistakes and is willing to learn from them and make amends the next time. For cisgender people, this includes sharing lessons learned with others so that the responsibility does not fall exclusively on trans people. Cisgender people in positions of power, such as educators, health professionals, and public officials, may be able to use their power to significantly improve the lives of trans people while also being aware of when to take a step back and center trans leadership.

1) RESPECTING A PERSON'S NAME

Quick tips:

- Always use someone's correct (self-determined/chosen) name.
- Never ask what someone's given or "real" name is or use it to refer to them.
- Refrain from putting the person's chosen name in quotation marks.

Explanation:

Regardless of whether the person has legally changed their name, it is important to address them by their chosen name. If you knew a person before they started going by another name, please keep that information to yourself. Sometimes people think they are demonstrating that they are supportive allies by saying, "I knew Mark when he was Mary" (thereby informing the listener that they have been supportive or present through a gender transition). Refrain from doing this, as it's not respectful of the person's name and/or gender.

Practical Applications:

- When creating forms, be sure to include a field for the person's correct/chosen name.

Conversation Example:

- *What name would you like me to use to refer to you?*
- *What name do you go by?*

2) RESPECTING PRONOUNS

Quick Tips:

- Always use someone's correct/chosen pronoun, regardless their legal gender marker or whether they've received transition-related medical care.
- If you don't know someone's pronouns, don't guess...simply ask.
- Refrain from arguing with people about their chosen pronouns.
- Refrain from putting the person's chosen pronouns in quotation marks.

Explanation:

Failing to use the correct pronouns, whether intentional or unintentional, can be hurtful. Examples of pronouns: she/her/hers, he/him/his, xe/xem/xyr, they/them/their, ze/hir/hirs, ey/em/eirs (among others). Some people use more than one set of pronouns, such as he/him/his and they/them/their. When this is the case, you may want to challenge yourself to alternate in using both sets of pronouns. If you tend to default to the pronouns that are more familiar or easier for you to use, challenge yourself to practice using the less comfortable or familiar set of pronouns.

A special note about gender neutral pronouns: In English, there is not a widely used gender neutral pronoun (as in Tagalog or Mandarin, for example).

Therefore, it can take extra intention and practice for one to use some of the pronouns that one is familiar with. The singular form of “they/them/their” has been used throughout history in literature, dating back to as early as the 14th century and used by respected authors such as Chaucer and Shakespeare.

When you make a mistake or misidentify someone’s pronoun, avoid going into shame or blame. Simply correct yourself instead of acting like it didn’t happen, and then move on. It doesn’t have to turn into a big discussion or apology, but in general it is helpful and considerate to acknowledge the mistake and correct it. Avoid voicing how hard it is for you to get pronouns right or your concerns about grammar. It is not a trans person’s responsibility to reassure or comfort you when you make a mistake.

Practical Applications:

- During group introductions, invite people to say their name, pronouns (optionally), and whatever other relevant information (e.g., job title, age). Inviting people to share pronouns sends the message that we cannot assume pronouns based on name or appearance.
- When creating forms, include a fill-in field that allows people to designate their pronouns.

Conversation Examples:

- *What are your pronouns?*
- *My name is Alex, and my pronouns are she/her/hers. What are your pronouns?*

3) DESCRIBING SOMEONE ELSE’S GENDER IDENTITY OR DESIGNATION

Quick Tips:

- Use the language that a person uses for themselves regarding gender.
- You can’t assume another person’s gender or gender identity based on how they look.
- Remember that there are many more than two options for gender identity.
- Remember that not everyone’s gender identity feels aligned with sex assigned at birth.
- The terms that individuals use to describe themselves may vary widely based on culture (race, age, etc.). It is recommended that providers lead with affirming terms suggested in this guide, but listen for language that people use to refer to themselves and mirror that back to them.
- The following table contains current affirming terms to describe gender.

The following table contains current affirming terms to describe gender and/or bodies:

Instead of:	Try this:
Biological male, natal male Male-bodied Born male	Assigned male at birth (aka AMAB) Designated male at birth (aka DMAB) Predicted male at birth
Biological female, natal female Female-bodied Born female	Assigned female at birth (aka AFAB) Designated female at birth (aka DFAB) Predicted male at birth
Opposite sex	Another sex, a different sex
Both sexes, both genders Both men and women	All genders, people of all genders
Male-to-female, MTF <i>Still used In some regions.</i>	Transgender woman, trans woman Trans feminine person
Female-to-male, FTM <i>Still used In some regions.</i>	Transgender man, trans man Trans masculine person

Explanation:

Sex is something that is assigned at birth, usually according to genitals. But there's a lot more to sex and gender than genitals. And it really is an oversimplification to say that sex is biological, while gender is not. The brain is part of the body too, and sometimes the brain is what is telling someone information about what is and feels authentic for them in terms of gender.

Men and women are not opposites. They are sometimes different and sometimes similar.

Someone's "real" gender is based on their own internal sense of who they are, not based on their genitals or how others see them.

Practical Applications:

- When asking about someone's assigned sex or gender, try to pause and ask yourself if and why it is relevant to ask. If it is out of curiosity, this is not an appropriate reason to ask. If it is for a legitimate reason, such as needing to know what sex a person was assigned at birth in order to determine appropriate medical care or procedures, it is important to ask in a sensitive manner.

Conversation Examples:

- *How would you describe your gender?*
- *What terms, if any, do you use to describe your gender?*
- *People of all genders can use this restroom.*

4) TRANSITION-RELATED TERMS

Quick Tips:

- Transition can include legal, medical, social, emotional, spiritual, and relational aspects – so refrain from assuming transitioning means seeking medical care.
- Don't assume that every trans person desires or is able to access gender affirming medical care.
- Remember that medical information and histories are sensitive.
- If you wouldn't ask a cisgender person about their genitals or medical/surgical history, then you probably shouldn't ask a trans person about this information either.
- Some people don't like the concept of transition. Some people who decide to start hormones or have surgery will describe this as "medicalizing" rather than transitioning.

Explanation:

Transition is a multi-faceted process that some, not all, trans people go through. Some people desire to alter their bodies in order to feel more aligned with gender identity, or the internal sense of who they are (man, woman, neither, etc.). Other trans people do not desire medical transition but wish to socially transition (e.g., name change, pronoun change, live and be respected according to their gender identity).

Don't assume transition is an event. Many people think transition means "the surgery" or "a sex change surgery". There is no one medical procedure that changes someone from one gender to another. Some who want to access gender-affirming medical care cannot because they do not have health insurance or economic means to do so.

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Practical Applications:

- If it is appropriate to ask someone about transition (most of the time it will not be relevant), do so in a way that does not communicate that transition is an expectation.
- Avoid using terms like “post-op” or “pre-op” before describing a trans person’s gender identity. This perpetuates the expectation that all trans people want to or will eventually have surgery.

Conversation Example:

- *What forms of transition are part of your path?*
- *Are you interested in gender-affirming medical care?*

5) DESCRIBING BODIES

Quick Tips:

- Never ask about someone's genitals. You wouldn't ask a cisgender person what genitals they have. It's equally inappropriate to ask trans people.
- If you are a medical provider and it is appropriate to ask because it is relevant to the reason why they are meeting with you, try to use gender neutral language.
- It can be more respectful to refer to body parts (especially genitals) using “the” instead of “your” (e.g., “the cervix” instead of “your cervix”).

Instead of:	Try this:
Breasts	Chest, chest tissue
Penis, vagina	Genitals, private parts
Female reproductive, male reproductive organs	Name the specific organ (e.g., uterus, tests)
Beard	Facial hair

Explanation:

- It is intrusive and disrespectful to casually discuss another person's genitals or other private body parts, yet trans people encounter this all the time. Respect others' freedom to decide how to refer to their own bodies, and whenever possible try to use gender neutral language.

Practical Applications:

- Pay attention to how sex-specific medical information is recorded in electronic health record (EHR) systems and if they allow for the complexity sometimes introduced when a trans person has socially or medically transitioned but may still need some of the same medical care associated with their birth-assigned sex.

Conversation Example:

- *I want to respect how you would like me to talk about your body. What words would you like me to use?*
- *It is important for people with ovaries and uteruses to have a gynecological exam regularly.*

6) IN GREETING PEOPLE (NOT JUST TRANS PEOPLE)

Quick Tips:

- Opt for gender neutral ways of greeting or addressing all people.

Explanation:

Even when you know the person you're addressing is okay with a gendered greeting, this can alienate or signal to a trans person that he/she/they may not be in a trans-sensitive or affirming environment.

Instead of:	Try this:
Ladies and gentleman.. Hey ladies! Hey girls! Hi guys! Hey boys!	Hello everyone, hi all.. Hey y'all!
Yes, ma'am!	Sure, I can do that!
Dear Mr. Smith,	Dear Jesse Smith,
You guys	You, you all, y'all