

Beyond the Binary

Supporting Non-Binary and Gender-Diverse Trans People



Beyond the Binary: Supporting Non-Binary and Gender Diverse Trans People

Trans and gender diverse people exist on a broad spectrum. While many trans people identify as men, or women, many trans people also identify with gender identities outside of, or overlapping with, those two categories. Trans people may identify as genderqueer, agender, genderfluid, non-binary, or use a variety of other terms to describe themselves and their identities.

What does it Mean to be Non-Binary or Gender Diverse?

Non-binary and gender diverse are both broad categories describing a wide range of identities, experiences and understandings of self. Similarly, men and women both encompass a wide range of experiences. There is no single way to be, or look, as a non-binary person, man, woman, or gender diverse person. Being non-binary or gender diverse means different things to different people.

We often reinforce or revert to gender stereotypes when discussing non-binary and gender diverse people. If we can recognize that all gender categories are complex, and that assumptions about who people are, or how they relate to their gender, are always reliant on outdated stereotypes, we must embrace an understanding of non-binary and gender diverse that resists the replication of such stereotypes. Non-binary and gender diverse people, similarly to men and women, deserve the space and respect to be them

What's the Difference Between Binary and Non-Binary Trans Identities?

In practice, the distinction between binary and non-binary trans people is often exaggerated. Trans people, binary or not, face various complex issues. While there are some issues more commonly associated with non-binary people (for example, the transphobic notion of non-binary identities as a 'fad'), and some that are more commonly associated with binary trans people (for example, transphobic allegations that binary trans people aren't truly the gender they know themselves to be), the different ways that all trans people are impacted by transphobia vary depending on a diversity of factors, including gender expression, race, income, ability and numerous other factors.

While the distinction between binary and non-binary trans identity is often misunderstood, it is important to respect the ways that individual trans people describe and experience their identities. Non-binary and gender diverse trans people, as well as trans men and trans women, deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.

How can I Support Non-Binary and Gender Diverse People in my Life?

1: Respect Names and Pronouns

Many trans and gender diverse people change their names and/or pronouns when they come out. Respecting the chosen names and pronouns is an essential practice to demonstrate respect for trans and gender diverse people.

While traditional pronouns, such as she, her and hers, or he, him and his, are widely recognized, many non-binary and gender diverse people use the pronouns they, them and theirs. While using these pronouns in a singular context may be new to you, it can and will become natural with practice.

Some trans, non-binary and gender diverse people use other pronouns, such as xe and xyr (pronounced 'zee' and 'zer'), or cultural pronouns that do not have a clear equivalent in the English language. People use alternative pronouns for a wide variety of reasons, but similarly to how we would respect an individual's name, even if we haven't heard it before, or have to adjust to its correct pronunciation, we should do the same for people's pronouns. In all cases, learning to use an individual's identified pronouns is a small practice change that conveys our respect for trans and gender diverse people's identities and rights.

2: Embrace Diverse Gender Expressions

How we dress should have no impact on how we are treated. We all deserve to be respected, and included, regardless of how we present. If we can acknowledge that a woman is still a woman, with or without makeup, in masculine or feminine clothing, with hair long or short, we must recognize that how we present is *not* an effective way of gauging our gender.

Some non-binary people present masculine. Some non-binary people present feminine. Some non-binary people present androgynous. All are equally non-binary, regardless of how they dress. Non-binary identity is *not* fundamentally tied to any given gender presentation.

3: Avoid Unnecessarily Gendered Language

We often use unnecessarily gendered language, like ‘guys’ and ‘ladies and gentlemen’. This language often excludes trans and non-binary people, and can result in us feeling unseen, or unwelcome, in many spaces. Gendered language often feels natural to us – we use it instinctively without thinking about it. By catching ourselves in the moment, pausing, and replacing our intended words with more inclusive alternatives, we can create more supportive environments for trans and gender diverse people.

Gendered Term	Gender-Neutral Alternative	Rationale
Pregnant woman	Pregnant person	People of any and all genders can become pregnant. Many people assume that a pregnant person is a woman, though that is not always the case.
‘Female’ or ‘male’ genitalia or reproductive health systems	Use precise anatomical terminology such as vulva, penis, or reproductive organs. It is always a good idea to ask the client what terms they use to refer to their genitals as sometimes anatomical terms can also create discomfort.	The use of gendered terms like ‘male’ or ‘female’ often presents barriers to trans people. For example, many trans men would not see themselves reflected in the term ‘female genitalia.’

Gendered Term	Gender-Neutral Alternative	Rationale
Miss, Mister or Sir	Honorifics are often best avoided due to their gendered nature. However, the pronoun Mx. (pronounced like “mix”) is a gender-neutral honorific used by some non-binary and gender diverse people.	If you do not know an individual’s gender identity, using a gendered honorific such as Miss, Mister or Sir can inadvertently misgender someone.
Ladies or guys	Folks, people, humans, friends, team, everyone	“Ladies” and “guys” are both often used to refer to groups of individuals, and inadvertently make assumptions about the gender identities of those you are referring to.
Boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife	Partner, significant other, spouse	We often assume that individuals are heterosexual, and dating people of the ‘opposite’ gender. However, use of such gendered terms, without prior consent, erases same-gender relationships, or people in relationships with non-binary individuals.
Brother, sister, etc.	Sibling	Brother and sister are both examples of terms that are appropriate when used accurately, but which, when used incorrectly, may inadvertently misgender trans and non-binary siblings.
Fireman, Chairman, (etc.)	Firefighter, Chairperson, (etc.)	Gendered terms are commonly used to refer to different professions or roles. Using these terms can often result in advertently misgendering people.



4: Emphasize Gender Autonomy

Non-binary and gender diverse people are often obligated to navigate unnecessarily gendered spaces, particularly washrooms, changerooms and similar spaces. While non-gendered alternatives are growing in prevalence, they remain rare and are often unavailable to non-binary and gender diverse people.

Gendered spaces can present significant risks to trans people. Many trans people have experienced discrimination while accessing washrooms, for example. In many situations, trans people are forced to make tough choices. For example, trans men and transmasculine people often choose to use women's washrooms, because of the risk of male violence should they access men's washrooms.

While navigating gendered systems, spaces and services that were not designed to include trans people, autonomy is always essential. Acknowledging the complex factors at play, including safety and comfort, trans people should always be empowered to access whichever gendered space they feel safest within.

