

Understanding Pronouns

What they are and how to respect them



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We use pronouns each and every day, as a short and simple alternative to using a proper noun. Pronouns are like shortcuts - they provide a faster and easier way to communicate without frequently repeating a noun. One type of pronoun is a personal pronoun - for example, we might use “he,” “she,” “you,” “they,” or “we” instead of repeating someone’s name. In the English language, pronouns, when used to refer to people in the third person, are often gendered, meaning that we assume an individual’s pronouns based on our perception of their gender.

Why Does Using the Correct Pronouns Matter?

Using someone’s pronouns shows that we respect who they are and how they want to be described. For trans people, using incorrect pronouns indicates that you don’t see them as the person and gender that they know themselves to be. This is what we call ‘misgendering.’ At its core, misgendering is a way of telling someone that we think we know who they are better than they do.

How Can I Respect Someone’s Pronouns?

The best way to respect everyone’s pronouns is to never assume what someone’s pronouns are without asking them, and to provide opportunities for individuals to disclose their pronouns, while using gender neutral language until their personal pronouns are confirmed. It is also important to encourage others to adopt this practice. A great way to try this out is by disclosing your own pronouns as a way of starting a conversation.

Sharing your pronouns is an invitation for others to do the same. It shows trans and gender diverse people that you are safe for them to be out and honest with.

Example: “Hi, my name is Lisa, and I’m an intake nurse here at the clinic. I use she and her pronouns. What can I help you with today?”

What if You Don’t Know, and Don’t Have an Opportunity to Ask?

In this situation, using gender-neutral language is a good place to start. In using gender-neutral language, we avoid unintentionally using incorrectly gendered pronouns or terms.

Some gender-neutral terms or pronouns feel more difficult to use than others. If we’re used to using “they” in a plural context, it can take time and effort to normalize using it to refer to individual people, and that’s okay. Practice using “they” and “them” to refer to individual people, and it’ll feel natural in no time.

Respecting Privacy and Autonomy

Asking people for their pronouns, and disclosing your own, is an important part of creating a welcoming and inclusive environment. Nonetheless, it is important to be intentional about how and when we ask people their pronouns. Individuals should never be pressured to disclose pronouns or put on the spot to do so in public spaces where they may not necessarily feel safe enough.

Asking people their pronouns is best done during private conversations, rather than in public spaces. If you do not know someone’s pronouns, opt for gender-neutral options, like ‘they’ or ‘them,’ or stick to their name, until you have an opportunity to ask.

Some trans people may use different names and/or pronouns in different contexts. This is

often due to safety considerations, and is particularly common for trans people who may not be 'out' publicly as trans.

Some trans people, for example, will be 'out' with their friends, but not with their family, and therefore may use two different sets of names and pronouns. In these scenarios, it is best to speak with the trans person in question to confirm which pronouns/name to use in different scenarios. Managing different names and pronouns may sound complicated - and indeed it can be - but is of the utmost importance to protect the privacy, confidentiality and safety of trans clients.

Embracing Diverse Pronouns

While 'he/him,' 'she/her' and 'they/them' are by far the most common pronouns, many trans people use other pronouns to describe themselves. These include new or 'neo' pronouns, like 'ze and zer,' or pronouns associated with different communities, cultures, and languages. Regardless, all people deserve to have their pronouns respected, even if those pronouns are new to us. If you encounter new pronouns, practice them in your head or in front of a mirror until they become easier for you to remember and use.

It is also important to note that many people use multiple sets of pronouns. For example, an individual might use both 'she' and 'they' pronouns. In most cases, if individuals use multiple pronouns, you are generally welcome to use either, or both, at your discretion.

In group contexts, adding pronouns to introductions is an important way to signal acceptance and inclusion of trans people. However, it is equally important to allow people to opt-out of disclosing their pronouns if they so choose. Additionally, not all people use pronouns at all – some people simply prefer to have their name used instead.

If you are hosting a meeting, you may prompt others to introduce themselves, using the following example: "Hi everyone! My name is Mark. I use 'they' and 'he' pronouns, and I'm based in Waterloo. I'd like to invite everyone to introduce themselves, their names, where they're located, and, if they'd like, their pronouns". This approach models inclusion by inviting people to disclose their pronouns, without putting pressure on them to do so if they would prefer not to.



Where Do We Go Wrong?

Many of us are used to assuming someone's gender and pronouns based on our perception of how they look. We make assumptions, largely without noticing it, based on people's hairstyles, clothing, makeup (or lack thereof), physique, and more.

If we can acknowledge that everyone has a right to express their gender however, they would like – that men can wear dresses or makeup, and that women can wear masculine clothing and cut their hair short – then we must acknowledge that we can't possibly know an individual's gender, or their pronouns, based on a superficial assessment.

By assuming an individual's pronouns or gender identity based on how they look, we are making assumptions that reinforce harmful gender roles, and imposing our own loaded assumptions about gender onto others.

Normalizing Pronouns Means Unpacking All of Our Assumptions About Gender

One common mistake people make is to only ever ask people they think are trans or gender diverse about their pronouns. However, you cannot tell if a person is trans just by looking at them. Similarly, you cannot know a person's gender based on their appearance. Any person you meet, whether you know it or not, might be trans.

We need to normalize asking for pronouns and disclosing our own - otherwise, we inadvertently make harmful assumptions about people's identities. This simple practice avoids awkward and possibly hurtful mistakes while showing trans people the respect they deserve.

Conjugating Gender Pronouns

Subjective	Objective	Possessive	Reflective
He	Him	His	Himself
She	Her	Hers	Herself
They	Them	Theirs	Themselves or Themselves
Ze	Hir/Zir	Hirs/Zirs	Hirself/Zirself

Embracing Inclusive Language: Harmful Phrasing and Terminology To Avoid

Language is ever evolving, as we discover or create new ways to describe ourselves and our communities. Due to the pervasive nature of transphobia, there are a wide variety of terms and concepts that have historically been used to malign and denigrate trans people. Simultaneously, there are numerous terms and phrases that, while still used by some trans people, are not considered appropriate for general use. Always respect the terms individual trans people use to describe themselves.

Here are some examples of harmful or outdated terminology, and more inclusive alternatives.

Transgendered: This term inaccurately conveys that being trans is something that happens to someone or is otherwise acquired somehow, rather than being one aspect of an individual's identity. Instead, use "trans" or "transgender."

Transgenderism: This term is unnecessarily medical in nature. “Transgenderism” is often used by opponents of trans rights to argue that transness is a dangerous or harmful social contagion or mental health issue.

Transvestite: Historically, this term has been a slur used to attack, denigrate or mock trans and gender diverse people. Alternatively, try using “trans” or “gender diverse.”

Male-to-Female (MTF) // Female-to-Male (FTM): While some trans people continue to use these terms - and have every right to do so - MTF and FTM are not in alignment with best practices for talking about or to trans people, as they unnecessarily focus on an individual’s assigned gender rather than on their true gender identity. Instead, use terms like “trans woman”, “trans man” or “nonbinary person.”

“Amanda used to be Jacob”: Disclosing an individual’s previous name, or deadname, is considered offensive and harmful by most trans people. It is best to avoid utilizing a trans person’s previous name unless absolutely necessary. In some cases, you may need to use an individual’s legal name for the purpose of protecting their safety (for example, if they are not ‘out’ to everyone) or for the purpose of documentation, if legal name information must be collected.

“What’s your real name?”: Trans peoples’ chosen names are our real names, and questions about previous names are considered invasive. Questions about trans people’s “real names” perpetuate the idea that trans people are being deceptive or dishonest by living as their true and authentic selves.

“This is my trans friend, Caleb”: Trans people are not defined by our trans identity. Being trans is just one of many aspects of our identities and is not relevant in most conversations. Introducing us as trans is harmful

because it instantly discloses our trans identity in spaces where we may not be safe.

“Have you had the surgery”: Trans people have a right to privacy about our bodies, including any medical procedures we may have participated in. Trans people are often barraged with inappropriate and unnecessary questions about our bodies and medical histories. Questions about medical procedures are only relevant under specific health-care-related contexts and should be avoided unless absolutely necessary.

“You don’t look trans”: There is no one way to “look trans.” Trans people express their genders with as much variety and diversity as everyone else. Being trans is not fundamentally about how we look, but about who we are.

“Biologically Male/Female”: These terms are unnecessarily rooted in sexual characteristics. Trans people’s bodies are whatever gender they say they are. A trans woman has a woman’s body, and is indeed biologically female. Referring to a specific set of sexual characteristics as inherently male or female can be considered a form of misgendering by some trans people. Rooting trans people’s identities in our assigned gender is harmful and conveys the notion that we’re operating under false pretenses by ‘obscuring’ our true gender/sex.

“Born in the wrong body”: While this narrative resonates with some trans people, it should not be used to describe trans people at large, as it fixates inappropriately on trans people’s bodies and presumes that being trans causes emotional suffering due to one’s body. Not all trans people experience discomfort with their physical anatomy, and not all trans people access medical procedures to alter or adjust their physical anatomies.

“Preferred Pronouns”: While this terminol-

ogy is a step in the right direction, pronouns are in fact obligatory, rather than preferred. The use of the term “preferred” inaccurately conveys that using our correct pronouns is optional. “Gender pronouns,” “personal pronouns” or simply “pronouns” are all viable alternatives

Addressing Mistakes, Misgendering and Other Microaggressions

We all make mistakes. People are not perfect, and it is not fair to expect them to be. Learning a person’s new set of pronouns, or their new name, can take a bit of time, especially if they are someone we have known for a long time. While mistakes will happen, it is important for cisgender people to recognize the harm such mistakes cause. Using the correct name and pronouns is an act of basic respect that is routinely afforded to cisgender people, but often denied to trans and gender diverse people.

What to Do When You Make a Mistake

When we make mistakes, it is important to apologize, correct ourselves and move on. In most situations, when we make a mistake, we can address the issue quickly and move on. Mistakes cause harm, but they don’t have to be a big deal. Many trans people are used to misgendering. That’s not to say it’s okay - but rather, that we live in an imperfect world. To address your mistake, you can take the following steps:

- 1) Apologize: “Oh, sorry, I used the wrong pronoun there.”
- 2) Correct yourself: “Anyways, I saw James today and they were really excited for winter.”

Practice Makes Perfect

If you are struggling to adjust to a person’s new name or pronouns, practice them in the mirror or in your head. Say their name and pronouns out loud a few times. Human brains have an incredible capacity to learn and grow - through repetition, we can help ourselves change our practices and avoid making mistakes in the first place.

Don’t Make it About Yourself

When we make mistakes, it’s important not to centre ourselves. When many trans people are misgendered, they are often then pushed to make the person who made the mistake feel better - to reassure them that they’re a good person, to support them if they’re feeling guilty about the mistake that they made. While your guilt in those moments is a valid emotional response to harm you inadvertently caused, it is inappropriate and unfair to expect a trans person to prioritize you and make you feel better when you are the one who caused harm. This tendency often puts the burden back on trans people, while simultaneously making what may have been a minor mistake into a bigger issue than it had to be.

Working Towards Allyship and Solidarity with Trans People

To support trans people, it is important that we work in allyship and solidarity, that we seek to address and dismantle the structural and systemic factors that perpetuate poverty, homelessness, poor mental health and the high prevalence of suicidality in trans communities. While learning and changing our practices on an individual level is an **important and integral step, we can also work with trans communities towards a better tomorrow.**

Working in allyship and solidarity isn't about a title - we don't get to just wake up one day and call ourselves an ally - it's a process and a commitment. Through allyship - the verb, the action, rather than the noun, we push ourselves to support trans people and tackle transphobia on an ongoing basis.

Working in allyship and solidarity means using the power and privilege afforded to us to support the rights, inclusion, safety, health and liberation of trans people. Allyship is about supporting individual trans people in our lives, but also supporting trans communities in our region, and advocating for trans people to address transphobia and improve well-being on local, provincial, national and international levels.

Allyship has to be Grounded in Trans Communities

Again - we don't get to call ourselves allies because we attended one workshop. That's a starting point, but allyship has to be an ongoing commitment. First and foremost, when working in allyship, we should ground our efforts in the needs and expertise of trans communities. It's not about us saying "I have all the solutions, trans people should listen to me". Rather, it's asking ourselves "how can I support trans activism in my area? How can I

uplift advocacy coming from local trans people and organizations?" By grounding our allyship in a commitment to trans leadership, we ensure that our work is aligned with the organizing efforts of local trans people, and addressing issues that matter most to them.

Allyship has to Extend to our Workplaces and Families

We can't only work in allyship when it's easy or convenient. Working in allyship obligates us to advance trans inclusion in our own workplaces, communities and families. By advocating for our workplaces to improve their trans inclusion policies or bring in training, we are helping ensure trans communities have more positive experiences in those spaces. By working to educate our families and non-trans peers, we are taking the burden off of trans people to have to do that work themselves, to have to educate others, which is often an exhausting practice routinely demanded of trans people

Allyship Should be Grounded in Material Realities and Dismantling Systemic Barriers

Trans and gender diverse communities face persistent structural barriers perpetuated by different levels of government, alongside social, cultural, economic and political institutions. Working in allyship with trans communities should extend to working alongside trans and 2SLGBTQ+ organizations to advance public policy solutions and legislative change for trans communities. Uplifting calls to action and justice, such as calls to end conversion therapy, improve access to transition-related healthcare, for more funding for 2SLGBTQ+ and trans community organizations, and other key issues, you can help trans communities dismantle structural transphobia.

Allyship Isn't About the Spotlight

Trans and gender diverse people are always the best experts in their own identities, experiences and needs. Our communities are also the best experts on viable solutions to improve our lives and dismantle transphobia. When working in allyship and solidarity, it is important to be mindful of who we center. Allyship isn't about rewards for ourselves - though we can recognize that dismantling transphobia ultimately benefits us all. Allyship is about using our power and privilege to support other communities impacted by oppression.

Working in allyship means centering trans people, rather than taking center stage ourselves. We should always strive to uplift the voices of trans people over and above our own.

