



How to be an Ally to Transgender People

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You may know a friend, family member, or coworker who is transgender, or you may have seen a transgender person in the media. You might have questions such as what pronouns to use when referring to this person or wondering about how you can support them. Showing your support as an ally for transgender people is incredibly important due to the discrimination, stigma, and inequality they face. Transgender people encounter significant challenges, including heightened poverty, harassment, homelessness, unemployment, and suicide rates. Additionally, the transgender community lacks adequate legal protection. There can be increased challenges for transgender people who are also members of other minority groups, such as people of color (The Human Rights Campaign Foundation, n.d.; GLAAD, 2020). Family acceptance and support is particularly impactful on the wellbeing of transgender youth. Thus, it is crucial to support and advocate for transgender people.

The term “gender identity” refers to a person’s internal knowledge of their own gender. “Sex assigned at birth” is determined as male, female, or intersex, based on the appearance of the body’s physical anatomy when a baby is born. For some, gender identity matches the sex assigned at birth; this is referred to as “cisgender.” However, in transgender people, gender identity and sex assigned at birth do *not* align. For example, a transgender woman is a woman who was assigned male at birth. Additionally, non-binary people hold gender identities that do not fit neatly into either of the two options of male or female (GLAAD, 2020).

Acting as an ally is important not only for transgender people who you know personally, but for the transgender community overall. Allies can contribute to social and cultural changes by creating a safer and better place for transgender people to exist. Being an ally at all times is important, not just when you are around a transgender person. Here are some tips for how you can act as an ally for the transgender community (GLAAD, 2020):

- **Respect the terminology a transgender person uses:** Not all transgender people use the same terminology to describe themselves and their experiences. One person may use the term “transgender,” another may use the term “non-binary,” and others might use different terms. Make sure to respect the terms each individual person uses and do not make assumptions or tell them how you think they should refer to themselves.
- **Be patient with people who are questioning or exploring their gender identity:** Gender identity is each person’s *internal* knowledge of their *own* gender, so do not impose a specific gender identity on someone. Instead, give them time to figure this out for themselves. It may take some time to determine what is true for oneself. This exploration may involve the use of one name or

pronouns at first, then a change to a different name and/or pronouns later. Try to be respectful of and use the name and pronouns requested at any given time. Gender identity, expression, name, and pronouns may be fluid and can shift over time.

- **Recognize the diversity among transgender people:** Everyone has unique preferences and experiences, including people within the transgender community. Recognize that there is no single way to exist as a transgender person, just as there is no single way to live as a cisgender person. Some transgender people may undergo a medical transition involving hormone therapy and surgeries, while others may not. Accept transgender people in their gender identity regardless of whether they have medically transitioned. Also, be aware that there is not a certain “look” that indicates a person is transgender, so you cannot know who is or is not transgender just from looking around. Because of this, you may assume there could be transgender people around wherever you go. Do not assume that everyone is cisgender.
- **Listen to others and introduce your own pronouns if you are uncertain about what pronouns to use:** If you are unsure of what pronouns to use, listen to others who know the person to see what pronouns they use. If you need to ask which pronouns the person uses, start by introducing yourself with your own pronouns (“I’m Emily, I use the pronouns she and her. What pronouns do you use?”).
- **Apologize and be open to corrections if you misgender someone:** Misgendering might occur by using the incorrect pronouns and/or name when referring to a transgender person. Have an openness to being corrected if you misgender a transgender person. If you accidentally do this, apologize to the person right away but do not belabor your mistake. Make conscious efforts to use their correct name and pronouns moving forward.
- **Respect boundaries:** Do not ask personal questions just because someone is transgender. Asking about a transgender person’s birth name can be anxiety-provoking or upsetting, and their birth name may be something they want to leave behind. Avoid using or sharing their birth name if you know it. Additionally, avoid questions related to a transgender person’s surgical status, sex life, or genitals. You likely would not ask these questions of people who are cisgender, so extend the same respect and boundaries to transgender people. If they wish to discuss these aspects of their personal life, allow them to bring it up first.
- **Listen to transgender people, learn more, and recognize your limits as an ally:** Recognize that transgender people are the experts of their own experiences. Be open to hearing them with an open mind and allow them to speak for themselves. Utilize social media, books, films, etc. created by transgender people to learn more about the community. Learn more about the history of transgender people as well. Also, acknowledge that you may not know everything and be willing to admit when you do not know something. Avoid making assumptions, which could be incorrect or hurtful.

Remember that you can also talk to someone. If you are a parent or friend of a transgender person and are struggling to accept, understand, or cope with their transition, seek out resources for yourself. You may choose individual therapy and/or support groups specifically for the loved ones of transgender people. You may benefit from talking to a psychologist or other mental health professional if you are struggling with mixed emotions surrounding a loved one’s transition. Many providers are offering

psychotherapy via secure internet video connection at this time. The Pennsylvania Psychological Association can assist you in finding a local psychologist by using the [Psychologist Locator](#). You can also ask your health care professional or a trusted friend to recommend a psychologist or other mental health professional.

References

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