

Language to Discuss Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The language used by members of the LGBTQ community to discuss their identities is constantly evolving. While you do not need to use all the words listed below, having some familiarity with these terms and the concepts they convey will make it easier for you to understand your LGBTQ patients when they talk about themselves, their lives and their relationships. This list is not exhaustive, but includes many of the terms commonly used in the LGBTQ community.

Terms Used to Discuss Gender

Androgynous: Being neither clearly masculine nor feminine, as in dress, appearance, or behavior.

Biological Sex: The genetic, physiological and anatomical characteristics of maleness or femaleness with which a person is born. The sex assigned to a person at birth.

Bottom Surgery: Surgery designed to bring patients' genitalia into alignment with their gender identity.

Cis-gender: Term used to describe those who are not-transgender. Cis-gender people experience a match between their gender identity and the physical sex assigned to them at birth.

Cross Dresser: A person who enjoys dressing in clothes typically associated with the other gender: also called a transvestite. Many cross-dressers are heterosexual men.

Cross Living: Living full time in one's preferred gender identity which does not correspond to one's assigned sex at birth.

Drag Queen/King: A man/woman (respectively) who dresses in clothes, typically flamboyant and glamorous styles, associated with female/male (respectively) movie stars or singers, all with theatrical intent and sometimes with the intention of poking fun at gender roles.

Gender/Gender Roles: The socially constructed and culturally specific behavior and appearance expectations imposed on women (femininity) and men (masculinity.)

Gender Bender: Anyone crossing the gender line that does not care about appearing "convincing," Example: a man wearing a dress, who looks like a man wearing a dress, and is comfortable looking like a man wearing a dress

Gender Expression: Any and all mannerisms, personal traits, etc. which serve to communicate a person's identity and personality as they relate to gender and gender roles. Masculine, feminine, and androgynous gender expressions can be present in people of any sex or gender identity, even though they are often associated with men, women, and non-binary genders respectively.

Gender Identity: One's psychological sense of oneself as male or female. This may or may not coincide with biological sex. Some people identify as neither male nor female or as both male and female. These individuals may use the term "queer" or "gender queer" to identify themselves.

Gender Queer: Term used to describe a person who rejects the gender binary (male/female) in favor of a more fluid, nontraditional identity.

Intersex (or Intersexual): Persons born with the full or partial sex organs associated with both male and female biological sex, or with underdeveloped or ambiguous sex organs. About 4% of all births are intersex to some degree. This word replaces the politically incorrect hermaphrodite.

Sex Correction Surgery and Gender Alignment Surgery: Surgery designed to bring people's physical sex into alignment with their gender identity. See **top surgery** and **bottom surgery**.

Top Surgery: Surgery to remove or augment breast tissue in order to bring patients' physical body into alignment with their gender identity.

Transgender, Trans: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth, including but not limited to transsexuals, cross-dressers, androgynous people, gender queers, and gender non-conforming people. "Trans" is shorthand for "transgender."

Transman: Someone who was assigned female sex at birth and now identifies as male.

Transition: The process whereby transgender people move from living life with the gender associated with their physical sex at birth to the gender with which they identify.

Transsexual: Someone whose gender identity is in conflict with the sex assigned to him/her at birth. Transsexuals may seek sexual reassignment through the use of hormones, surgery and other means.

Transwoman: Someone who was assigned male sex at birth and now identifies as female.

Terms used to Discuss Sexual Identity or Orientation

Bisexual: Term used to describe a person who feels sexual desire and/or emotional attraction for both men and women

Dyke: A term historically used to attack and make fun of lesbians. Some lesbians have adopted the term to describe themselves, but the word should not be used by people outside the community as it can still be hurtful.

Gay: Term used to describe a man who feels sexual desire and/or emotional attraction exclusively or predominately for other men. The term may also be used to encompass both gay men and lesbians.

Heterosexual: Term used to describe a person who feels sexual desire and/or emotional attraction exclusively or predominantly for individuals of the opposite sex.

Homosexual: Term used to describe a woman or a man who feels sexual desire and/or emotional attraction exclusively or predominately for others of the same gender.

Lesbian: Term used to describe a woman who feels sexual desire and/or emotional attraction exclusively or predominately for other women.

Pansexual: Term used to describe a person whose sexual attraction is not tied to a person's sex and who can be attracted to people of all combinations of sex and gender. This is different from "bisexual" in that it implies some degree of rejection of the gender binary.

Polyamorous: People who identify as polyamorous typically reject the view that sexual and relational exclusivity are necessary for deep, committed, long-term loving relationships. They may engage in relationships that involve more than two people or may participate in more than one committed relationship at the same time.

Queer: Originally a derogatory label used to refer to lesbian and gay people. More recently, this term has been reclaimed by some lesbians, gay men, bisexual people, and transgender people, especially younger people, as an inclusive and positive way to identify all people targeted by heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia.

Sexual Orientation: The desire for intimate emotional and sexual relationships with people of the same gender (lesbian, gay), the other gender (heterosexual), either gender (bisexual,) or all genders (pansexual.)

Straight: Another term for heterosexual.

Two-spirit: Two Spirit is a contemporary term and came into being at the 3rd Annual International Gay and Lesbian Native Gathering in 1990. The attendees at the gathering organized a talking circle and came up with "Two-Spirit". They wanted a term that "...reflected the combination of masculinity and femininity which was attributed to males in a feminine role and females in a masculine role" (Lang 1998)(1) that existed in many traditional indigenous cultures of Turtle Island. This term indicates both identification with one or more categories in the LGBTQ spectrum and with Native American culture or identification with one of the many tribally specific "third gender" categories found in Native American cultures.

Other Important Terms

Ally: A straight, cis-gender person who actively supports and advocates for the equitable treatment and inclusion of LGBTQ people.

Coming Out: Coming out or coming out of the closet refers to an LGBTQ person's decision to acknowledge his/her gender identity and/or sexual orientation publicly. For many people, this is not a one-time event. A person may come out to various individuals at various times.

Homophobia: Homophobia encompasses a range of negative attitudes and feelings toward homosexuality or people who are identified or perceived as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ). It can be expressed as antipathy, contempt, prejudice, aversion, or hatred, and may be based on irrational fear.

Outing: When someone makes another individual's gender identity or sexual orientation public, often with the intent to harm the individual in some way.

Transphobia: A range of negative attitudes and feelings toward transsexual or transgender people, based on the expression of their gender identity. Whether intentional or not, transphobia can have severe consequences for the target of the negative attitude.

Adapted From Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures. Sabine Lang and John L Vantine. University of Texas Press. 1998.