

Potentially Offensive Terms and Phrases

It is important that you and those who work in your practice understand that some words and expressions may be offensive and hurtful to LGBTQ patients. This will help you avoid the use of language that might hurt LGBTQ people or make them uncomfortable. Once they understand the issue, all staff can be held accountable for using language that is appropriate and respectful.

Individual Words

Dyke – Used as an epithet against lesbians for most of the 20th century. May be used by lesbians as self-affirming. You should never use this term to refer to another person unless someone specifically asks that you refer to her that way.

Fag or Faggot – Used in England since the late 16th century as a derogatory word for women, particularly old women, “faggot” has been used in the US since the early 20th century as a derogatory term for gay men. While the derivation is unclear, it appears to come from a term that names a bundle of sticks. As with “dyke,” this term is sometimes used by gay men to talk about themselves, but should not be used by others.

Hermaphrodite – In biology, “hermaphrodite” is a term used to describe organisms that have the reproductive organs associated with both male and female sexes. Historically, this term was also used to describe people with ambiguous genitalia, but the word “intersex” is now preferred in this context as “hermaphrodite” is both inaccurate and stigmatizing.

She-male or He-she – These terms are dismissive and disrespectful. Use “transgender,” “transwoman” or “transman.”

Sissy – This term is sexist. It developed from the word “sister” and is used to refer to a boy or man who is seen as not sufficiently masculine. It implies femaleness as “less,” inferior, and weak. It implies strict gender norms to which everyone should conform.

Tomboy – This is also about gender presentation and stereotypes, and says that after youth, it is not acceptable for a girl/woman to be anything other than traditionally feminine. Girls who are more comfortable engaging in activities traditionally seen as masculine and/or who prefer to present themselves with clothes, hair styles, etc. that are seen as masculine can hear this term as a negative judgment, saying that they are not sufficiently feminine. Unlike “sissy,” this term is not always pejorative. Because our culture is male-dominant, a girl being more like a man can sometimes be seen as positive.

Tranny – A disrespectful term sometimes used to describe transwomen. While some transwomen use this term to refer to themselves and their friends, no one else should use the term. Use “transwoman” or “transgender woman” instead.

Transvestite – A term historically used to describe any person who dresses in clothing associated with the opposite sex, this term is now seen as derogatory and offensive. This term was originally used to include people we would now refer to as transsexual and transgender, as well as those who most often refer to themselves as cross-dressers. Cross dressers are heterosexual men who dress in women’s

clothing while continuing to identify as male and straight. These men most often do not see themselves as part of the LGBTQ community.

Phrases and Expressions

Admitted homosexual – “Admitted” implies that there’s something to hide or that being gay is wrong; or that telling the truth about who you are is wrong or a mistake. Would you say you were “admittedly heterosexual”? It is more appropriate to refer to someone as an “out gay man” or “out lesbian,” “referring to the expression “out of the closet” which means that someone is not hiding his or her sexual orientation.

Gay agenda – Used to imply a kind of malevolent, surreptitious plan to take over and ruin society or convert heterosexual people to homosexuality. No such agenda exists. The “agenda,” such as there is one, is the fight for equal rights and social justice on many fronts.

Gay lifestyle – When used, this phrase is most often meant to convey hyper-sexuality, promiscuity, or immorality. Life-style has to do with choices like how you use your free time (camping or attending the opera or having a family gathering) or where you live (urban vs. rural) and LGBTQ people choose a full range of lifestyles.

Gay people recruit – This phrase is mistakenly used to suggest that gay people are more likely to be predators, especially of young people. In fact, most pedophiles are straight men. The idea of recruitment ignores the fact that sexual orientation is a given and people find their appropriate partners as they mature.

I just think it’s wrong. – The judgment here is heterosexist and heteronormative (i.e., only heterosexuality is normal). If you feel this way and work in a clinical/medical environment, it is your obligation to avoid imposing your judgment and to provide excellent care to all.

If he didn’t have rainbow stickers on everything, or he didn’t dress that way, he wouldn’t get picked on. If you don’t want to be teased about being gay, don’t dress that way. --Statements of this type say that people should hide the truth about who they are. It is also a classic example of blaming the victim instead of holding people accountable for being respectful. It is similar to saying that if a woman didn’t wear short skirts, she wouldn’t be raped.

If she just found the right man, she would be straight (or, if he just found the right woman, he would be straight). It’s just a phase. --The subtext here is, “We’re all really heterosexual,” and that being gay is not normal for anyone.

I’m okay with gay people as long as they don’t flaunt it. – This reflects a double standard for what it means to “flaunt.” For example, while holding hands or a quick kiss in public are considered acceptable for straight folks, this might be considered flaunting for a gay couple.

Sex-change, sex change operation, or sex reassignment surgery -- People who undergo this type of surgery believe that the surgery is bringing their physical bodies in line with the gender identities they have always had and may not feel that their sex is being changed. Use “Sex Correction Surgery.”

Sexual preference – It's not a "preference." This language implies that sexual orientation is a choice, like the choice between vanilla or chocolate ice cream, as opposed to a central, given element of one's identity.

She's so pretty, she can't be gay! – A stereotype and misconception that lesbians can't be pretty feminine, etc. Gender presentation (feminine, masculine) does not convey sexual orientation.

That's so gay – In teen parlance, this phrase is used as a put-down meaning, "That's so stupid." This reinforces the idea that being gay is wrong or bad, and erodes the self-esteem of LGBTQ people.