

Sexuality Terms and Definitions

- Ally** – An individual whose attitudes and behaviors are supportive of all sexual orientations, anti-heterosexist, and who is active in combating homophobia and heterosexism, both on a personal and institutional level.
- Asexual** – A person who is not sexually attracted to anyone or does not have a sexual orientation. They may or may not experience romantic attraction.
- Bear** – The most common definition of a ‘bear’ is a man who has facial/body hair, and a cuddly body. However, the word ‘bear’ means many things to different people, even within the bear movement. ‘Bear’ is often defined simply as a sense of comfort with natural masculinity and bodies.
- Biphobia** – The fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of bisexuals, which is often times related to the current binary standard. Biphobia can be seen within the LGBTQI community, as well as society as a whole.
- Bisexuality** – A sexual orientation in which a person has the potential to feel physically and emotionally attracted to more than one gender.
- Butch** – A person who identifies themselves as masculine, whether it be physically, mentally or emotionally. ‘Butch’ is sometimes used as a derogatory term for lesbians, but it can also be claimed as an affirmative identity label.
- Coming Out** – Also, “coming out of the closet” or “being out,” this term refers to the process through which a person acknowledges, accepts, and in many cases appreciates their LGBTQIA+ identity. This often involves sharing of this information with others. It is not a single event but instead a lifelong process.
- Down Low** – To hide ones same-sex attractions and relationships while outwardly engaging in different-sex relationships. Also referred to as ‘D/L.’
- Dyke** – A term applied to lesbians, usually negatively, to stereotype them as masculine. It has been used recently by lesbians as a term of pride to mean strong, independent woman.
- Faggot** – A derogatory term for gay men. Also, a Latin word meaning “bundle of sticks” used for fuel. It is rumored that this term was applied to gay men during the Inquisition when they were burned along with heretics. In addition, “fag” was used to describe British lower-classmen who were forced to perform services (including sexual ones) for upperclassmen.
- Fag Hag**- A term primarily used to describe women who prefer the social company of gay men. While this term is claimed in an affirmative manner by some, it is largely regarded as derogatory.
- Family** – A term widely used by LGBTQIA individuals to identify other LGBTQIA people.
- Gay** – A common and acceptable word for male homosexuals, but used for all genders.
- Heteronormativity** – The assumption, in individuals or institutions, that everyone is heterosexual, and that heterosexuality is superior to all other sexualities.
- Heterosexism** – Prejudice against individuals and groups who display non-heterosexual behaviors or identities, combined with the majority power to impose such prejudice. Heterosexism excludes the needs, concerns, and life of LGBTQIA people while it gives advantages and privileges to heterosexual people. It is often a subtle form of oppression that reinforces realities of silence and invisibility.
- Heterosexual Privilege** – Those benefits derived automatically by being heterosexual that are denied to people who identify as LGBTQIA people.
- Homophobia** – The irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals, homosexuality, or any behavior or belief that does not conform to rigid sex role stereotypes. It is this fear that enforces sexism as well as heterosexism.

In the closet – to be “in the closet” means to hide one’s LGBTQIA identity in order to keep a job, a housing situation, friends, or in some other way to survive. Many LGBTQIA individuals are “out” in some situations and “closeted” in others.

Institutional Oppression – Arrangements of a society used to benefit one group at the expense of another through the use of language, media, education, religion, economics, etc.

Internalized Oppression – The process by which a member of an oppressed group comes to accept and live out the inaccurate negative beliefs applied to the oppressed group by society.

Lesbian – A common and acceptable word for a woman only attracted to other women.

Lipstick Lesbian – Usually refers to a lesbian with a feminine gender expression. Can be used in a positive or a derogatory way, depending on who is using it. It is sometimes also used to refer to a lesbian who is seen as automatically passing for heterosexual.

LGBTQIA – The acronym that means Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. The “Q” was most recently added to mean “questioning” or “queer.” The “I” means “intersex” and the “A” stands for “asexual” and sometimes “allies”.

Nellie – A derogatory term used to describe a gay man acting in an effeminate manner.

Outing – The act of telling others that a person is LGBTQIA+ without that person’s permission.

Pansexual – A person who is sexually attracted to all or many gender identities and/or expressions.

Polyamory- Refers to having honest, usually non-possessive, relationships with multiple partners and can include: open relationships, polyfidelity (which involves multiple romantic relationships with sexual contact restricted to those), and sub-relationships (which denote distinguishing between a ‘primary’ relationship or relationships and various ‘secondary’ relationships). Polyamory exists in the heterosexual community as well as the queer community.

QTPOC – Acronym standing for Queer and Transgender People of Color

Queer – Some LGBTQ people use this term as a way of reclaiming the power associated in the past with this term and other derogatory terms (such as fag or dyke). Others use it as a more general all-inclusive term to represent a variety of sexual orientations and/or gender identities or anything that defies easy definition or categorization. Like any term or label, there is no general consensus on what Queer means, and it is still considered offensive by some.

Same Gender Loving- A term sometimes used by members of the African-American/ Black community to express an alternative sexual orientation without relying on terms and symbols of European descent. The term emerged in the early 1990’s with the intention of offering Black women who love women and Black men who love men a voice, a way of identifying and being that resonated with the uniqueness of Black culture in life (Sometimes abbreviated as ‘SGL’.)

Sexual Orientation – A person’s emotional, physical, and sexual attraction and the expression of that attraction with another individual. The term “sexual orientation” is favored over “sexual preference,” as the latter term implies a choice, and most research shows that sexual attraction is not a choice.

*One of the more important things to remember is the importance of self-definition:
allowing people to define themselves, as they like.*

*Adapted from: Cleveland State University, Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs Website

Gender Terms and Definitions

Ally – An individual whose attitudes and behaviors are supportive of all gender identities and expressions and who is active in combating transphobia and cisgender-normativity, both on a personal and institutional level.

Agender – A person who does not experience a gender identity.

Androgynous: A gender expression appearing as neither nor woman; presenting a gender either mixed or neutral

Biological sex or natal sex - the physiological makeup of a human being, most often a combination of genetic, hormonal, morphological, chromosomal, gonadal, biochemical and anatomical determinates that impact the physiology of the body and the sexual differentiation of the brain. Sex is often assigned at birth based on the appearance of the baby's external genitalia.

Binding- The process of flattening one's breasts to have a more masculine or flat appearing chest.

Bottom Surgery- Surgery on the genitals designed to create a body in harmony with a person's preferred gender expression. It is typically inappropriate to ask someone about their surgery status.

Cisgender person – someone who comfortably identifies with the traditional male and female gender binary. Cis describes a person who does not identify as transgender because the individual's gender identity aligns with their assigned sex at birth.

FTM (female-to-male) - an acronym that is used for individuals who are assigned the sex 'female' at birth but identify as a man. The term that is currently most accepted in the United States is trans man.

Gender - a concept that is influenced by culturally constructed ideas typically based on the binary system of male and female but more recently understood to be a spectrum (i.e. man, woman, both, neither, transgender, third gender, etc.).

Gender Identity - the *internal* experience of gender or how one experiences their own sense of self as a gendered being.

Gender expression - an individual's outward and *external* gendered appearance. This may include hair styles, clothes, accessories, and mannerisms. Gender expression may also include gender roles which are also defined by an individual's culture/society. Gender roles may include careers, expectations for dating, and household chores.

Gender Binary- The idea that there are only two genders- man/woman and that a person must be strictly gendered as either/or.

MTF (male-to-female) - an acronym for individuals who are assigned the sex 'male' at birth and identify as a woman. The term that is currently most accepted in the United States is trans woman.

Sexual Reassignment Surgery (SRS) – A term used to refer to a group of surgical options that alter a person's "sex". Also known as "Gender Confirmation Surgery".

Stealth- This term refers to when a person chooses to be private in the public sphere about their gender history, either after transitioning or while successful passing. (Also referred to as 'going stealth' or 'living in stealth mode'.)

They/ Them/ Theirs - Alternative pronouns that are gender neutral and preferred by some gender variant persons.

Top Surgery- This term usually refers to surgery for the construction of a male-type chest, but may also refer to breast augmentation. It is typically inappropriate to ask someone about their surgery status.

Transgender – this term refers to individuals whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. It is also an umbrella term that includes people who identify as non-binary, gender queer, cross dressers, and other examples of individuals who gender identity or expression may differ from cultural expectations.

Transition- this term is primarily used to refer to the process a gender variant person undergoes when changing their bodily appearance to be more congruent with the gender they feel themselves to be and to be in harmony with their gender expression. These processes may include social, legal, and/or medical interventions but does not required.

Transphobia- The irrational fear of those who are gender variant and/or the inability to deal with gender ambiguity.

Ze/ Hir/ Hirs- Alternative pronouns that are gender neutral and preferred by some gender variant persons. Pronounced /zee/ and /here/, they replace “he”/”she” and “his”/”hers” respectively.

Other identities or terms that fall under the

Transgender Umbrella



Crossdresser- A person who wears clothes that are considered by the mainstream culture to be appropriate for another gender. They may be heterosexual, bisexual, or gay (preferred term to **transvestite**’).

Drag Kings and Drag Queens who may dress in the clothes of the “opposite” gender for identity, fun, or performance.

Gender Variant / Gender non-conforming – A person who either by nature or choice does not conform to gender-based expectations of society (e.g. transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, cross-dresser, etc.)

Genderqueer- Third-gender - A gender variant person whose gender identity is neither man nor woman, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders.

Gender Fluid – A person whose gender identity and expressions moves around on the gender spectrum. This can be daily or throughout their life.

Intersex - (previously termed *hermaphrodite*) - It is a variety of genetic, hormonal, chromosomal, or anatomical conditions in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t fit the typical classification as male or female. At birth, attending physicians often choose which gender to raise the child and perform reassignment surgery on individuals with ambiguous genitalia. Many who identify as intersex believe that early childhood surgical intervention is not only unnecessary but cruel and advocate counseling and support for children and families.

Trans man- An identity label sometimes adopted by female-to-male individuals to signify that they are men while still affirming their history as females. Also referred to as ‘trans guy(s).’

Transsexual – describes an individual whose gender identity is other than their biological sex. To better align their gender identity and bodies, some of these individuals will modify their bodies to conform to their gender identity. Changing their bodies may include a range of modifications from taking hormones, having feminizing or masculinizing surgeries, which can include electrolysis for hair removal, breast implants or breast reductions, and removal and/or construction of genitals and other reproductive organs. In the past such procedures were often called “sex changes,” but often the person going through this process does not believe that they are changing their sex, just making their body congruent with the sex they always were.

Transvestite- See cross dresser. (The term 'transvestite' is still used in a positive sense in England.)

Trans woman- An identity label sometimes adopted by male-to-female individuals to signify that they are women while still affirming their history as males.

Two Spirit – A Native American term for people who blend the masculine and feminine. Often used by LGBTQ Native Americans to describe themselves.

This is new gender territory for many of us and we are all still learning and growing while the terminology is continuously evolving.

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allow people to define themselves, as they like.***