

Everything you always wanted to know about trans people but weren't sure how to ask¹

Working with, befriending, or otherwise interacting with trans people is not scary, nor difficult. We're like everyone else. We're men, women, Democrat, Republican, Independent, liberal, moderate, conservative, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Pagan, atheist, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, interesting, boring — just about everything. You can run into us at parties, at the mall, at the grocery store, or at your local PTA meeting. In many cases, you might not even recognize us as trans.²

But since you may not know that you've met a trans person before (you likely have), it's natural that you probably have some questions. As the old cliché goes, there are no stupid questions, although there are some offensive questions you can ask a trans person (more about that later).

Let's get started with some basics

- A trans man is a man, a trans woman is a woman. It's that simple.
- Transgender – or trans – is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity or expression is different from the sex assigned to them at birth (e.g., the sex listed on their birth certificate). Some trans people transition, some don't.
 - You may have heard the term “cisgender,” it simply means someone who's not transgender.
- Gender identity is a primary aspect of gender. It's how you see and feel about yourself.
 - It's different than sexual orientation, and just like cisgender people, trans people can be straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual.
- Gender expression is how you demonstrate your gender through the ways you act, dress, behave, and interact. Often it's influenced by cultural norms about what men and woman “are like.”
- “Transitioning” is the process of changing one's life to live as one's authentic self, which can also involve changes in one's legal name and gender (i.e. what's listed on your driver's license) as well as possible medical and/or surgical procedures to bring your body into alignment with your gender identity.
- Medical experts have long agreed that it's a *medical* condition not a mental illness – although some people still believe this misconception. At least 1.4 million adults in the United States identify as transgender, about 0.6% of the population (or 1 in every 166 people), although the actual number is undoubtedly higher since the study didn't count transgender youths, and many trans people remain closeted.
- California and 17 other states have anti-discrimination laws that include trans people. Many companies, including Shutterfly, include gender identity and expression in their anti-discrimination policies.

Six quick tips for interacting with trans people

- Interact with trans people just like you would with anyone else. That said...
- Use whatever pronouns a trans person tells you they use. If you're not sure, ask them politely and discretely. Or use “they/them.”

- You'd never casually ask a friend or co-worker about their bodies or medical history, right? So please don't ask us either.
- If you make a mistake with a pronoun or name, just move on, and do your best to use the correct name and pronoun the next chance you get. Big public apologies just get awkward for everyone.
- Trans people use the restrooms that match their gender identity, and are there for the same reasons you are. If they happen to have toilet paper stuck to their shoe, they'd appreciate it if you'd tell them.
- Just like gossiping or spreading private details about any co-worker or friend is inappropriate, the same goes for "outing" a trans person.

Interested in learning more? Here's a bit more detail.

How do I interact with someone who is trans, or who I think might be trans?

Umm, kind of like anyone else? Refer to, respond to, and interact with all people by the gender they identify as, regardless of what their body looks like or the gender you think they might be. It's a matter of basic human decency. In fact, just be nice to everyone around you.³

Trans woman/trans man – which one to I use to describe someone?

The words aren't trying to trick you — a trans man is a man, a trans woman is a woman. It's that simple! Transgender people don't *want* to be, and aren't *pretending* to be, men or women. Transgender people *are* men or women (or both or neither, we'll get to that later) and those who transition, do so to better reflect that internal sense of who they are.⁴

What pronouns do I use with a transgender person? What do I do if I make a mistake? And what's the big deal with pronouns anyway?⁵

If you've ever been misgendered yourself, it was probably a disconcerting, and possibly hurtful, experience. Same thing for trans people. It's a bee sting to the heart.

Just use whatever pronouns someone tells you they use — after all, they know better than you what gender they are. If you're really not sure, simply ask (in a respectful and discrete way, of course). Or if you're not comfortable asking, just use the always handy, gender neutral "they/them." Don't call trans people an "it." Just don't. A table lamp is an "it."

If you make a mistake with a pronoun or name, move on, and make sure that you use the correct name and pronoun the next chance you get. Don't make a big deal out of it — it'll just make things uncomfortable for everyone. If you're alone with the person, apologize and drop it. We trans people know the difference between an accidental slip-up and intentional misuse.

Which restrooms do trans people use?

We use the restroom that's right for us, just like you use the restroom that's right for you, i.e. a trans woman uses the women's restroom and a trans man uses the men's restroom. We just want to get in, take care of business, and get out (after washing our hands of course).⁶

So what does "transgender" mean?⁷

Transgender — or trans — is an umbrella term for people, including transsexual people, whose gender identity or expression is different from the sex assigned to them at birth (e.g., the sex listed on their birth certificate). Not all trans people transition, in fact most don't (for reasons we'll get to), but it may seem that way since the vast majority of people who are "publicly trans" either are transitioning or have transitioned.

Conversely being cisgender – or cis – is when your experience of yourself matches what sex you were assigned at birth. E.g. when you were born, the doctor declared you female (or male), and ever since you identify as a woman (or man). That’s it. Being cisgender is not “normal,” just common. If that all sounds a bit unfamiliar, just remember that if you’re cisgender, you may not have ever thought much about your gender identity or expression. Gender is kind like of underwear — if it fits you don’t notice, and if it doesn’t you can’t avoid noticing.⁸

What’s this “gender identity or expression” thing you mentioned?

Gender identity is a primary aspect of gender. It is how you see and feel about yourself. As you can imagine, if the gender you were assigned at birth doesn’t match your own mental and psychological experience of yourself, that can cause a lot of discomfort. That kind of discomfort is called “gender dysphoria.” For some trans people, the gender dysphoria is strong enough that to ease it, you must live as the gender you see yourself as (what’s referred to as “transitioning”) and/or must physically modify your body to bring it into alignment with your gender identity.

Gender expression is all about how you demonstrate your gender through the ways you act, dress, behave, and interact — whether that’s intentional or unintended. Gender expression is interpreted by others perceiving your gender based on a particular society’s traditional gender roles (e.g., men wear pants, women wear dresses).

If a person is trans, does that mean they’re gay?

Nope, gender identity is about who you *are*; sexual orientation is about who you’re physically, spiritually, and emotionally attracted to.⁹ Two different things. Just like cisgender people, trans people can be straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual.

What’s “transitioning”?¹⁰

“Transitioning” is the process of changing one’s life to live as one’s authentic self. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to transition, and it’s different for every trans person. It’s a complex process that may involve any or all of the following:

- Social changes, including living as the gender that matches your authentic self.
- Changing your name and/or your legal gender, i.e. the gender listed on your driver’s license and other government ID.
 - Some trans people may not change their legal name/gender because some states make it difficult to do so, others cannot afford to do so.
- Medical treatments, including hormones and/or surgery, in order to bring your body into alignment with your gender identity.
 - Some trans people undergo these treatments some, some don’t, for a variety of reasons – surgeries are expensive (and usually not covered by insurance); some people have health issues that make medical treatments too dangerous or impossible; some trans people simply don’t feel the need to do so – but that doesn’t make them *not* a trans man or a trans woman.

How many transgender people are there? Have transgender people always existed?

A 2016 study by the Williams Institute estimated that at least 1.4 million adults in the United States identify as transgender — about 0.6% of the population (or 1 in every 166 people).¹¹ That’s a low-end estimate, since it did not include minors who identify as transgender, and there are many trans people who remain closeted, often deeply so.

Transgender persons have been documented in numerous Western, Eastern and indigenous cultures and societies from antiquity until the present day.¹² However, the meaning of gender and gender nonconformity varies from culture to culture – some cultures have four, five or even six genders. Mind blown.

There is no single explanation for why some people are transgender. The diversity of transgender expression and experiences argues against any simple or single explanation. Many experts believe that biological factors such as genetic influences and prenatal hormone levels, early experiences, and experiences later in adolescence or adulthood may all contribute to the development of transgender identities. However, medical experts have long agreed that it's a medical condition not a mental illness – although some people still believe this misconception about transgender people. For most trans people the main problem is not within ourselves, the problem is how other people treat us.¹³

What types of transgender people are there?¹⁴

Many gender identities fall under the transgender umbrella. Many trans people self-identify as “trans” precisely because it's an umbrella term. (A quick digression: “transgender” is an adjective, not a noun. Your co-worker or friend is trans or a transgender person. They are not “a transgender” or a “transgendered person” – just like someone isn't a “gayed” or “lesbianed” person.) Some trans people may feel the need to transition, some may not. Some people explicitly reject “transgender” as a label, and use the different terms. It can be complicated, and language used continues to evolve rapidly. But some of the more commonly used terms include:

- *Transsexual* is an older term that originated in the medical and psychological communities. It's still preferred by some people who have permanently changed — or seek to change — their bodies through medical interventions (including but not limited to hormones and/or surgeries). Unlike transgender, transsexual is *not* an umbrella term. Remember Venn diagrams from your school days? The whole “one thing is a subset of the other” thing applies here.
- *Cross-dresser* is typically used to refer to heterosexual men (and sometimes women) who occasionally wear clothes, makeup, and accessories culturally associated with women (or men). They do this a form of gender expression, and not because they're performers. Cross-dressers typically do not wish to permanently change their sex or live full-time as women (or men). This term is preferred over the outdated term, *transvestite*, which most cross-dressers consider derogatory.
- *Drag queen/drag kings* are performers who cross-dress, and often play with gender. Not everyone who does drag is transgender (most aren't), but some trans people do perform in drag. Remember that whole “not every rectangle is a square” thing? It's like that.
- *Gender queer* is an umbrella term for anyone who identifies as a gender besides man or woman, or as both man *and* woman. Whaaat?! There are genders besides man and woman? In a world where your hair, eye, and skin color can be any combination of things, not to mention body height and size, plus all the different ways people construct identities with clothes, tattoos, and hair styles, it is that weird to think gender contains more than two options?
- *Tranny* is a term most trans people find a highly insulting slur although there are a small number of trans people who use it to reclaim the term. (And San Francisco in particular has a complicated history with the term, which we won't get into here.) But just like

other slurs aimed at other groups, unless you're the one being targeted by the slur, it's not yourself to reclaim, nor use.

- *She-male...* Don't go there. Just don't. And don't Google why. Especially at work.

Why don't many trans people want to be "out"?¹⁵

"Coming out" to other people as lesbian, gay, or bisexual is typically seen as revealing a truth that allows others to know your authentic self. The cisgender LGB community places great importance and value on the idea of being "out" in order to be happy and whole. However, for trans people, being "out" can put the focus on who people thought you *were*, rather than who you *are*. It can also be a safety issue – in 2016 more than two dozen trans people in the U.S. were killed in hate crimes. Some trans people may choose to publicly discuss their lives in an effort to raise awareness and make cultural change, but many trans people feel happy and whole without generally disclosing that they're transgender.

In short, don't "out" a trans person without their permission.

What legal protections are there for trans people?

Eighteen states, including California, currently prohibit discrimination based on gender identity.¹⁶ Transgender advocates are trying to extend these protections to the other states where there are no laws protecting transgender (and LGB) people from being fired, denied housing and services, or otherwise be discriminated against for being who they are. However, many companies, including Shutterfly, have anti-discrimination policies that encompass and protect trans people.

I want to know more, are there any additional info that you'd recommend?

- Grace Annam has an excellent well-written and informative 101 guide: <http://amptoons.com/blog/?p=16420>
 - Note: It was written in 2013, so some of the stats are out of date.
- One quick chart illustrates the differences between gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation
 - The original: <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2011/11/breaking-through-the-binary-gender-explained-using-continuums/>
 - And version 2.0: <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/03/the-genderbread-person-v2-0/>
- The late Matt Kailey has several good articles, unfortunately now only available via Archive.org:
 - "Trans Etiquette for Non-Trans People": <https://web.archive.org/web/201511003164356/http://tranifesto.com/transgender-faqs-and-info/transgender-faq/>
 - "Ten Things Not to Say to a Trans Person": <https://web.archive.org/web/20151023093153/http://tranifesto.com/transgender-faqs-and-info/ten-things-not-to-say-to-a-trans-person>
- "Trans Etiquette 101: No offense But That's Offensive": <http://www.autostraddle.com/how-to-talk-to-a-transperson-76785/>
- GLAAD's "Tips for Allies of Transgender People": <http://www.glaad.org/transgender/allies>

Endnotes

There's a number of articles that spoke eloquently to particular points and they deserve due credit, since various parts of this document were either directly copied or lightly rewritten from them.

¹ Title from: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/sbkasulke/everything-you-always-wanted-to-know-about-transgender-people>

² From: <https://web.archive.org/web/20151024100404/http://tranifesto.com/transgender-faqs-and-info/trans-etiquette-for-non-trans-people>

³ From: <http://www.refinery29.com/transgender-how-to-be-an-ally-faqs>

⁴ From: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/sbkasulke/everything-you-always-wanted-to-know-about-transgender-people>

⁵ From:

- <https://www.buzzfeed.com/sbkasulke/everything-you-always-wanted-to-know-about-transgender-people>
- <https://web.archive.org/web/20151024100404/http://tranifesto.com/transgender-faqs-and-info/trans-etiquette-for-non-trans-people>

⁶ From: <https://web.archive.org/web/20151023093153/http://tranifesto.com/transgender-faqs-and-info/ten-things-not-to-say-to-a-trans-person>

⁷ From: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/sbkasulke/everything-you-always-wanted-to-know-about-transgender-people>

⁸ From: LaughrioTgirl via <http://amptoons.com/blog/?p=16420>

⁹ From: <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2011/11/breaking-through-the-binary-gender-explained-using-continuums/>

¹⁰ From:

- <http://amptoons.com/blog/?p=16420>
- <https://web.archive.org/web/20151024100404/http://tranifesto.com/transgender-faqs-and-info/trans-etiquette-for-non-trans-people>

¹¹ <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/How-Many-Adults-Identify-as-Transgender-in-the-United-States.pdf>

¹² <http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/transgender.aspx>

¹³ Yes, gender dysphoria is listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 6 — but if you smoke, that's nicotine dependence, and you're in the book, too. There are a lot of things in the DSM-6 that aren't really mental illnesses. But because current medical protocols reference the DSM-6, for the moment gender dysphoria must remain in the DSM in some form. Otherwise, trans people would be denied necessary medical care. If not for that, gender dysphoria would probably be removed from the DSM entirely.

From: <http://amptoons.com/blog/?p=16420> and also see:

- <http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/transgender.aspx>
- http://www.wpath.org/site_page.cfm?pk_association_webpage_menu=1352&pk_association_webpage=3947

¹⁴ Definitions from:

- <https://www.buzzfeed.com/sbkasulke/everything-you-always-wanted-to-know-about-transgender-people>
- <https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>

¹⁵ From: <http://www.glaad.org/transgender/allies>

¹⁶ <http://www.hrc.org/resources/transgender-faq>