

Living Language: LGBTQ Terminology

Though connected and overlapping, the following language of sexual and gender identity are often distinct and unique. Try not to think of them as definitions, but rather explanations.

Ally: Any person who supports and advocates for a community that they may or may not identify with. Heterosexual allies of the LGBTQ communities are commonly referred to as "Straight Allies."

Androgyny: Having the characteristics of both maleness and femaleness; neither specifically feminine nor masculine. Some people that identify as androgynous may be read as being "in between" genders. Other words that may convey similar meaning are: gender-neutral or gender-fluid.

Asexual: An identity for individuals who do not experience sexual attraction. Unlike celibacy, which is a choice, asexuality is a sexual orientation. Asexual people have the same emotional needs as everybody else and are just as capable of forming intimate relationships.

Bisexual: An identity for people who are attracted emotionally, erotically, and/or sexually to some men and women. Other identities such as 'pansexual' and 'queer' may have this same explanation, but this may vary depending on the person.

Cissexism: It is the belief that transgender identified genders are inferior to, or less authentic than, those of cisgender.

Cisgender: Someone whose gender identity accurately reflects their sex assigned at birth, their bodies, and their gender expression. A similar adjective is gender-normative.

Coming Out (of the Closet): To be "in the closet" means to hide one's identity. Many LGBTQ people are "out" in some situations and "closeted" in others. To "come out" is to take a risk by sharing one's identity, sometimes to one person in conversation, sometimes to a group or in a public setting. Coming out is a life-long process—in each new situation a person must decide whether or not to risk coming out. Coming out can be difficult for some because reactions vary from complete acceptance and support to disapproval, rejection or violence.

Cross-Dresser: Individuals who occasionally or regularly wear the clothing socially assigned to the other gender, but are usually comfortable with their sex assigned at birth, and do not wish to change it. Most men who cross-dress are heterosexual, but can have any sexual orientation. Very few women identify as cross-dressers.

FTM or F2M (Female to Male): An identity for a person who was assigned female at birth, and who identifies as male, lives as a male or identifies as masculine. Related identities: transgender male, transman, trans guy.

MTF or M2F (Male to Female): An identity for a person who was assigned male at birth, and who identifies as female, lives as a female or identifies as feminine. Related identities: transgender female, transwoman.

Gay: An identity for people who identify as men and who are attracted emotionally, erotically, and/or sexually to some other men.

Gay used to be an umbrella term to refer to all lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, but using it as such now may wrongly position gay men as representing all LGBTQ people. Some lesbians and queer folk may use it to identify themselves.

While some folks consider this identity synonymous with “homosexual” (or view it as a more proper way to refer to this identity) many folks that identify as gay may consider it a pathologizing and an awkwardly formal way to refer to members of the community.

Gender: A set of social, psychological and emotional traits, often influenced by societal expectations that classify an individual as feminine, masculine, androgynous or other. Though often linked with sex, this is inaccurate because sex refers to birth genitalia and/or chromosomes or hormones and gender refers to social and emotional feelings and norms. Gender characteristics can change over time and vary across different cultural contexts.

Gender Attribution: The process by which an observer decides which gender they believe another person to be.

Gender Binary: The concept that everyone must be one of two genders: men or women. The term also describes the system in which a society divides people into masculine or feminine gender roles, gender identities, and gender attribute.

Gender Expression: Refers to an individual’s intentional and unintentional physical characteristics, behaviors, and presentation (such as appearance, dress, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social interactions) that are traditionally linked to either masculinity or femininity. This holds no bearing on an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity.

Gender Identity: The words we use to describe our gender: man, woman, androgynous, bigender, transgender, genderqueer, among others.

Gender Non-Conforming or Gender Variant: An umbrella term for people whose gender characteristics and/or behaviors fall outside, or in between, traditional masculine or feminine binaries. Gender non-conforming people may or may not identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer.

Genderqueer: An identity for people who do not identify and/or who do not express themselves as completely masculine or feminine. Genderqueer people may or may not identify as transgender.

Gender Role: A set of traditional and stereotypical roles, traits, dress, characteristics, qualities, mannerisms and behaviors attributed to men and women.

Heterosexism: A term that applies to attitudes, bias and discrimination in favor of opposite-sex sexuality and relationships. It includes the presumption that everyone is heterosexual or that opposite-sex attractions and relationships are the norm and therefore superior. It is the belief that everyone is or should be straight. Heterosexism is a broader term than homophobia in that it need not imply the fear and loathing the latter term suggests. It can describe seemingly benign statements or questions, such as asking a young woman if she has a boyfriend, or asking a man what his wife does for a living based on the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm.

Homophobia: Refers to discriminatory thoughts or practices against LGBTQ people. Homophobia can be understood as a destructive force that prevents many LGBTQ people from securing safe, open, and equal lives. It can also pertain to a person's feelings about themselves called internalized homophobia.

Homosexual: An identity for a person who is attracted emotionally, erotically, and/or sexually to some members of their own sex. Generally, the term homosexual is no longer used and is replaced by lesbian, gay or LGBTQ.

Intersex: An umbrella term referring to a health condition, often present at birth, involving anatomy or physiology that differs from societal expectations of male and female. Intersex conditions can affect the genitals, the chromosomes and/or secondary sex characteristics. Hermaphrodite, while still used as an identity by some, is no longer an acceptable way to refer to intersex people. People who are intersex should not be assumed to be transgender. This term is currently being challenged because it labels the person rather than the physical condition.

Lesbian: An identity for people who identify as women and who are emotionally, erotically, and/or sexually to some other women.

LGBTQ: An umbrella term referring collectively to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and/or queer. Gay used to be the general phrase used but now LGBTQ is the more current and inclusive term.

MSM (Men who Sleep with Men): A term given to men who engage in sexual activity with other men regardless of their self-identified sexual orientation.

Queer: An umbrella term to refer to all LGBTQ people as well as an identity which advocates breaking binary thinking and seeing both sexual orientation and gender identity as potentially fluid. While it has been reclaimed as a unifying, celebratory, and neutral term among many LGBTQ people today, historically it has been derogatory and can still be viewed negatively by some.

Questioning: An identity for people who are uncertain of their sexual orientation and/or their gender identity.

Sexual Behavior: This is what we do sexually and with whom.

Sexual Identity: This is what we call ourselves in terms of our sexuality. Identities include: lesbian, gay, bisexual, bi, bicurious, pansexual, queer, questioning, straight, asexual, and many more.

Sexual Orientation: This is the deep-down, inner feeling of who we are attracted or "oriented" to emotionally, erotically, and/or sexually.

Sex Realignment Surgery (SRS): A term used to describe surgical procedures which alter the physical appearance and function of an individual's existing sexual characteristics to resemble a different sex.

"Sex change" is now considered inaccurate, derogatory, and no longer used.

Other terms: Sex Reassignment Surgery, Gender Realignment Surgery, Gender Reassignment Surgery, Genital Reconstruction Surgery, Gender Confirmation Surgery, and Sex Affirmation Surgery.

Sex Assigned at Birth: Refers to the biological characteristics between males and females. Sex is typically assigned at birth based on an infant's external genitalia. Chromosomes (such as XX or XY) and hormones (such as estrogen or testosterone) are also involved, but are hardly ever tested to assign a sex to an individual. Also known as Biological Sex.

Straight/Heterosexual: An identity for a person who is attracted emotionally, erotically, and/or sexually some members of the opposite sex.

Transgender or Trans*: A broad umbrella term that can be used to describe people whose gender expression is non-conforming and/or whose gender identity is different from their sex assigned at birth. Transgender people may or may not choose to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically. People must self-identify as transgender in order for the term to be appropriately used to describe them.

Transition: Refers to the myriad of actions a person may take including the social, psychological and medical process of transitioning from one gender to another. Transitioning is a complex process that occurs over a long period of time, it is not an event. This may include changing one's name, taking hormones, having surgery, or changing legal documents like a driver's license, Social Security records, etc.

Transphobia: Refers to discriminatory thoughts or practices against those who are perceived to break or blur stereotypical gender roles, expressed as stereotyping, discrimination, harassment and/or violence. Usually directed at those who defy stereotypical gender norms or those who are perceived to exhibit non-heterosexual characteristics regardless of their actual gender identity or sexual orientation. Since this type of discrimination targets folks who are **perceived** to blur or transgress traditional gender behavior and expression, the people that experience it may or not actually identify as trans or gender non conforming.

Transsexual: An older term, which originated in the medical and psychological communities. The term historically referred to people whose gender expression is non-conforming and/or whose gender identity is different from their sex assigned at birth regardless of where they are in the transition process. Many transgender people prefer the term "transgender" to "transsexual". Unlike transgender, transsexual is not an umbrella term.