



## **Tips for Trans\* Allies**

The following are tips that can be used as you move toward becoming a better ally of trans\* people. Of course, this list is not exhaustive and cannot include all the "right" things to do or say - because often there is no one "right" response to every situation you might encounter. Trans\* identities and experiences are diverse and deeply impacted by intersections with other identities (race, class, ability, nationality, etc.).

When you become an ally of trans\* people, your actions will help change the culture, making society a better, safer place for trans\* people - and for cisgender people who don't conform to gender expectations. Being an ally is not about identifying as an ally, but about taking action.

*Note: Trans\* is an umbrella term that includes transgender, non-binary, and gender nonconforming identities.*

### **You can't tell if someone is trans\* just by looking.**

Trans\* people don't all look a certain way or come from the same background, and many may not appear "visibly trans." It's not possible to look around a room and "see" if there are any trans\* people. (It would be like a straight person looking around the room to "see" if there are any gay, lesbian or bisexual people.) You should assume that there may be trans\* people at any gathering.

### **Use a person's preferred pronoun.**

Use the pronouns of the gender the person feels themselves to be, regardless of what body that person may have been born into or how they look. If you are not sure which pronouns a person uses, ask. This is sign of respect and support. If you accidentally use the wrong pronoun, apologize quickly and sincerely, then move on. The bigger deal you make out of the situation, the more uncomfortable it is for everyone.

### **Don't make assumptions about a trans\* person's sexual orientation.**

Gender identity is different than sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is about who we are attracted to. Gender identity is a person's internal, psychological sense of who they are as a gendered being. Trans\* people can be gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, asexual, straight, etc.

While a person's sexual orientation is not directly connected to a person's gender identity, some people who are transitioning may question previous understandings of their own sexual orientation and choose a new label for themselves. Don't assume you know what someone's sexual orientation is or is going to be.

## **Understand the differences between "coming out" as lesbian, bisexual, or gay and "coming out" as trans\*.**

"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 LGB community places great importance and value on the idea of being "out" in order to be happy and whole. When a trans\* person has transitioned and is living as their authentic gender - that **is** their "truth." The world is now seeing them as their true self. Unfortunately, sometimes when others discover a person is trans\*, they no longer see the person as a "real" man or woman - which can be disempowering for the trans\* person. Some people may choose to publicly discuss their lives in an effort to raise awareness and make cultural change, others may not identify fully within the gender binary, but don't assume that it's necessary for a trans\* person to be "out" to everyone in order to feel happy and whole.

## **Be careful about confidentiality, disclosure, and "outing."**

Some trans\* people feel comfortable disclosing their trans\* status to others, and some do not. Knowing a trans\* person's status is personal information and it is up to them to share it. Do not casually share this information or gossip about a person you know or think is trans\*. Not only is this an invasion of privacy, it also can have negative consequences in a world that can be very intolerant of gender difference - trans\* people can lose jobs, housing, friends, family or even their lives upon revelation of their trans\* status. If your sense is that the person is fully public about their gender identity and experience, ask just to be sure. Try: Is there anyone with whom you prefer I not share this information?

## **Avoid backhanded compliments or "helpful" tips.**

While you may intend to be supportive, comments like the following can be hurtful or even insulting:

"I would have never known you were trans\*. You look so pretty."

"You look just like a real man/woman."

"She's so gorgeous, I would have never guessed she was trans\*."

"He's so hot, I'd date him even though he's trans\*."

"You're so brave."

"You'd pass so much better if you wore less/more make-up, had a better wig, etc."

"Have you considered a voice coach?"

## **Be patient with a person who is questioning or exploring their gender identity.**

Discovering one's gender can be challenging and it takes time to figure out what name and/or pronouns are most comfortable. A person may ask to be called by one name one day, and another name another day. Be respectful and call the person by the name and pronouns they request. Although it can be hard to refer to a person by a new name, a person who is questioning their gender will usually notice and appreciate your effort to respect their wishes. Try: Practice using the person's new name and/or pronoun in your head when you are thinking about them.

**Be patient with a person who is undergoing physical transition.**

Be aware that a trans\* person who chooses to go through hormone therapy or undergo "sexual re-assignment surgery" will have to endure an often times long and frustrating process as they try to seek the mandatory medical approval to receive hormones and/or surgery. Many trans\* people experience mood swings as their bodies adjust to hormones.

**Respect the terminology a trans\* person uses to describe their identity.**

The trans\* community uses many different terms to describe their experiences. Respect the term (trans\*, transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, gender fluid, two-spirit, nonbinary, etc.) a person uses to describe themselves. If a person is not sure which identity label fits them best, give them the time and space to figure it out for themselves. Don't tell them which term you think they should use. You wouldn't like your identity to be defined by others, so please allow others to define themselves.

**Understand there is no "right" or "wrong" way to be trans\*.**

Just as there is no one way to be a man or a woman, there is no right way to be trans\*. Each person will choose a path that they feel is right for them; no one path is better than any other. Some trans\* people access medical care like hormones and surgery as part of their transition. Some trans\* people want their authentic gender identity to be recognized without hormones or surgery. Some trans\* people cannot access medical care, hormones, and/or surgery due to lack of financial or other resources. A trans\* identity is not dependent on medical procedures. Just accept that if someone tells you they are trans\* - they are.

**Don't ask a trans\* person what their "real name" is.**

For some trans\* people, being associated with their birth name is a tremendous source of anxiety, or it is simply a part of their life they wish to leave behind. Respect the name a trans\* person is currently using. If you already know someone's prior name, don't share it without the person's explicit permission. Birth names are often referred to as "dead names" within the community.

**Don't ask about a trans\* person's genitals or surgical status.**

It wouldn't be appropriate to ask a cisgender person about the appearance or status of their genitalia, so it isn't appropriate to ask a trans\* person that question either. Likewise, don't ask if a trans\* person has had "the surgery" or if they are "pre-op", "post-op", or non-op." If a trans\* person wants to talk to you about such matters, let them bring it up.

**Don't ask a trans\* person how they have sex.**

Similar to the questions above about genitalia and surgery - it wouldn't be appropriate to ask a cisgender person how they have sex, so the same courtesy should be extended to trans\* people.

### **Challenge anti-trans\* remarks and jokes, including in LGB spaces.**

You may hear anti-trans\* comments from anti-LGBTQIA activists - but you may also hear them from people in the community. Someone may think because they're gay it's ok for them to use certain words or tell jokes about trans\* people. It's important to confront the former and educate the latter.

### **Support gender neutral public restrooms.**

Some trans\* people may not match the little signs on the restroom door. Encourage schools, businesses and agencies to have single user, unisex and/or gender neutral bathroom options. Make it clear in your organization that all people are welcome to use whichever restroom they feel comfortable using.

### **Make your organization truly trans-inclusive.**

"LGBTIA" is now a commonplace term that joins lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, intersex and asexual people under the same acronym. If an organization or group lists "trans\*" as part of its name or mission statement, it needs to truly understand the needs of the trans\* community and involve trans\* people in all aspects of the group's work. (The same thing goes for the other letters!)

### **Listen to trans\* people.**

The best way to be an ally is to listen with an open mind to trans\* people when they talk about their lives. Talk to trans\* people in your community. Check out books, films, YouTube channels, and blogs to find out more about trans\* lives.

### **Know your own limits as an ally.**

When speaking with a trans\* person who may have sought you out for support or guidance, don't be afraid to admit when you don't know something. Volunteer to work with the person to find appropriate resources. It is better to admit you don't know something than to make assumptions or say something that may be incorrect or hurtful.

(Adapted from GLAAD's "Tips for Allies of Transgender People" & Eli R. Green's "Ideas for How to be a Trans Ally")

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