

Becoming a better ally

The following are tips that can be used as you move toward becoming a better ally to transgender 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" answer to every situation you might encounter.

When you become an ally of transgender people, your actions will help change the culture, making society a better, safer place for transgender people - and for all people (trans or not) who do not conform to gender expectations.

You can't tell if someone is transgender just by looking.

Transgender 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 transgender people. (It would be like a straight person looking around the room to "see" if there are any gay people.) You should assume that there may be transgender people at any gathering.

Don't make assumptions about a transgender person's sexual orientation.

Gender identity is different than sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is about who we're attracted to. Gender identity is about our own personal sense of being male or female (or someone outside that binary.) Transgender people can be gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, or any of a number of other sexualities.

If you don't know what pronouns to use, listen first.

If you're unsure which pronoun a person prefers, listen first to the pronoun other people use when referring to that person. Someone who knows the person well will probably use the correct pronoun. If you must ask which pronoun the person prefers, start with your own. For example, "Hi, I'm Dani and I prefer the pronouns she and her. What about you?" Then use that person's preferred pronoun and encourage others to do so. 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 ask a transgender person what their "real name" is.

For some transgender 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 transgender person is currently using. If you happen to know the name someone was given at

birth but no longer uses, don't share it without the person's explicit permission. Similarly, don't share photos of someone from before their transition unless you have their permission.

Understand the differences between "coming out" as lesbian, bisexual, or gay and "coming out" as transgender.

"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 transgender person has transitioned and is living as their authentic gender - that **is** their truth. The world now sees them as their true selves. Unfortunately, it can often feel disempowering for a transgender person to disclose to others that he or she is transgender. Sometimes when others learn a person is trans they no longer see the person as a "real" man or woman. Some people may choose to publicly discuss their lives in an effort to raise awareness and make cultural change, but please don't assume that it's necessary for a transgender person to always disclose that they are transgender in order to feel happy and whole.

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

Some transgender people feel comfortable disclosing their transgender status to others, and some do not. Knowing a transgender 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 transgender. Not only is this an invasion of privacy, it also can have negative consequences in a world that is very intolerant of gender difference - transgender people can lose jobs, housing, friends, or even their lives upon revelation of their transgender status.

Respect the terminology a transgender person uses to describe their identity.▯

The transgender community uses many different terms to describe their experiences. Respect the term (transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, cross-dresser, etc.) a person uses to describe themselves. If a person is not sure of which identity label fits them best, give them the time to figure it out for themselves and 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.

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

A person who is questioning or exploring their gender identity may take some time to find out what identity and/or gender expression is best for them. They might, for example, choose a new name or pronoun, and then decide at a later time to change the name or pronoun again. Do your best to be respectful and use the name and/or pronoun requested.

Understand there is no "right" or "wrong" way to transition - and that it is different for every person.

Some transgender people access medical care like hormones and surgery as part of their transition. Some transgender people want their authentic gender identity to be recognized without hormones or surgery. Some transgender people cannot access medical care, hormones, and/or surgery due to lack of financial resources. A transgender identity is not dependent on medical procedures. Just accept that if someone tells you they are transgender - they are.

Don't ask about a transgender person's genitals, surgical status, or sex life. □

It would be inappropriate to ask a non-transgender person about the appearance or status of their genitals, and it's equally inappropriate to ask a transgender person those questions. Don't ask if a transgender person has had "the surgery" or if they are "pre-op" or "post-op." If a transgender person wants to talk to you about such matters, they will bring it up. Similarly, it wouldn't be appropriate to ask a non-transgender person about how they have sex, so the same courtesy should be extended to transgender people.

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 transgender. You look so pretty."
- "You look just like a real woman."
- "She's so gorgeous, I would have never guessed she was transgender."
- "He's so hot, I'd date him even though he's transgender."
- "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?"

Challenge anti-transgender remarks or jokes in public spaces - including LGB spaces.

You may hear anti-transgender comments from anti-LGBT activists - but you may also hear them from LGB people. Someone may think that because they're gay it's okay for them to use certain words or tell jokes about transgender people. It's important to challenge anti-transgender remarks or jokes whenever they're said and no matter who says them.

Support gender neutral public restrooms.

Some transgender and gender non-conforming people may not feel like they match the signs on the restroom door. Encourage schools, businesses, and agencies to have single user, unisex and/or gender neutral bathroom options. Make it clear that transgender and gender non-conforming people are welcome to use whichever restroom they feel comfortable using.

Help make your company or group truly trans-inclusive.

"LGBT" is now a commonplace term that joins lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender under the same acronym. If you are part of a company or group that says it's LGBT-inclusive, remember that transgender people face unique challenges, and that being LGBT-inclusive means truly understanding the needs of the trans community.

At meetings and events, set an inclusive tone.

At a meeting where not everyone is known, consider asking people to introduce themselves with their name and preferred pronouns. For example, "Hi, I'm Nick and I prefer the pronouns he and him." This sends the message that you are not making assumptions about anyone's gender, and that people are free to self-identify. Start with yourself and use a serious tone that will discourage others from dismissing the activity with a joke. However, if you feel this practice will have the effect of singling out the transgender people in the room, avoid it. Also, in a group setting, identify people by articles of clothing instead of using gendered language - for example, the "person in the blue shirt," instead of the "woman in the front." Similarly, "Sir" and "Madam" are best avoided. If bathrooms in the meeting space are not already gender neutral, ask if it's possible to put gender neutral signs on them.

Listen to transgender people.

The best way to be an ally is to listen with an open mind to transgender people themselves. Talk to transgender people in your community. Check out books, films, YouTube channels, and transgender blogs to find out more about transgender lives.

Know your own limits as an ally.

Don't be afraid to admit when you don't know something. It is better to admit you don't know something than to make assumptions or say something that may be incorrect or hurtful. Then seek out the appropriate resources that will help you learn more.

Adapted from MIT's "Action Tips for Allies of Trans People."