



National Center for  
**TRANSGENDER  
EQUALITY**

## Supporting the Transgender People in Your Life: A Guide to Being a Good Ally

Learning to be an ally to the transgender people in your life, or to transgender people overall, is an ongoing process. Some ways to be a good ally are relatively simple and easy, while others require more time, energy, and commitment. Whether you're looking for information on supporting a transgender person in your life or looking for tools that will help you to change the world to be better for transgender people overall, this guide can help.

One of the most important parts of being an ally to transgender people is learning what it means to be transgender. For information on identity, language, and other issues facing transgender people you can visit [Frequently Asked Questions about Transgender People](#), [Understanding Non-Binary People](#), and [our About Transgender People hub](#), which has links to various resources and educational material.

### The basics: things to remember about being an ally

**There is no one way to be a 'perfect' ally.** The transgender community is diverse and complex, coming from every region of the United States and around the world, from every racial and ethnic background, and from every faith community. This means that different members of the transgender community have different needs and priorities. Similarly, there is no one right way to handle every situation, or interact with every trans person. Be respectful, do your best, and keep trying.

**You don't have to understand someone's identity to respect it.** Some people haven't heard a lot about transgender identity, or have trouble understanding what it means to be trans, and that's okay. But all people, even those whose identities you don't fully understand, deserve respect.

**You can't always tell if someone is transgender simply by looking at them.** Many people expect that they'll "just know" when someone is trans, and may be surprised to learn that this isn't always true. Since there is no one transgender experience, there is no one way for transgender people to look, either. This also means that transgender people may be in groups or gatherings that you attend without you knowing it, making it important to be an outspoken ally and supporter even in spaces that you think don't have any transgender people in them.

**There is no "one right way" to be transgender.** Some transgender people choose to medically transition, and some don't. Some transgender people choose to legally change their names or ID documents, and some don't. Some transgender people choose to change their appearance (like their clothing or hair), and some don't. Likewise, some transgender people may want to do many of those things but are unable to because they can't afford it or for safety reasons. A transgender person's identity does not depend on what things they have or haven't done to transition, and no two transgender people's journeys are exactly alike.

**Continue to educate yourself.** One of the simplest ways to be a strong ally is to take your education into your own hands. It's important to have conversations with the trans people in your life, but it's also important for you to seek out resources and information on your own.

A few great places to start:

- [Frequently Asked Questions about Transgender People](#)
- [Understanding Non-Binary People](#)
- [About Transgender People](#)

## Interacting with transgender people

This section includes information on respectfully interacting with transgender individuals one-on-one or when in a small group.

**Use the language a transgender person uses for themselves.** No two transgender people are exactly the same, and different transgender people may use different words to describe themselves. You should follow the lead of each transgender person, as they will best know the language that is right for them.

**If you don't know what pronouns to use, ask.** A simple way to see what pronouns someone uses—he, she, they, or something else—is to wait and see if it comes up naturally in conversation. If you're still unsure, ask politely and respectfully, without making a big deal about it. Sharing your own pronouns is a great way to bring up the topic—for example, “Hi, I'm Rebecca and I use she/her/hers as my pronouns. How about you?” If you accidentally use the wrong pronouns, apologize and move on. Making a big deal out of a pronoun mistake may be awkward and often draws unwanted attention to the transgender person.

**Be careful and considerate about what other questions you ask.** There are many topics—medical transition, life pre-transition, sexual activity—that you may be curious about. That doesn't mean it's appropriate to ask a transgender person about them, or expect a transgender person to be comfortable sharing intimate details about themselves. There are two questions you can ask yourself that may help determine if a topic is appropriate to bring up:

“Do I need to know this information to treat them respectfully?” Asking someone's name and pronoun is almost always appropriate, as we use that information in talking to and about each other every day. Beyond that, though, you may be curious about questions that are not things you truly need to know. For example, a transgender coworker's surgical history is rarely information that you need to know.

“Would I be comfortable if this question was turned around and asked of me?” Another good way to determine if a question is appropriate is to think about how it would feel if someone asked you something similar. For example, it would probably not feel appropriate for a coworker to ask you about your private areas of your body. Likewise, it's probably not appropriate to ask similar questions about a transgender coworker's body.

Here are some specific topics that many transgender people are uncomfortable discussing with anyone but those closest to them:

- Their birth name (never call it their “real” name!) or photographs from before they transitioned
- What hormones they are (or aren't) taking
- What surgeries they have (or have not) had
- Questions related to sexual relationships

**Someone's transgender identity is their private information to share, or not.** Just because someone has told you that they are transgender does not necessarily mean that they have told everyone in their life. A transgender person may not choose to tell others that they are transgender because it is unsafe to do so, because they're worried they'll be mistreated or fired, or simply because they don't want to share that information with someone. It is not up to you to decide who should or shouldn't know that a particular person is transgender. Similarly, transgender people should be the ones to decide how much information is being shared: a transgender person may be open about being trans, but only want to discuss medical issues with certain close friends. Simply because a transgender person has told you something about their experiences doesn't mean they want everyone to know.

**Avoid compliments or advice based on stereotypes about transgender people, or about how men and women should look or act.** People sometimes intend to be supportive but unintentionally hurt transgender people by focusing on their looks or whether they conform to gender stereotypes. Here are some examples of what to avoid, as they often feel like backhanded compliments:

- “You look like a real woman! I never would have known that you're trans.”
- “You would look less trans if you just got a wig/shaved better/wore more makeup/etc.”
- “No real man would wear clothing like that. You should change if you don't want people to know you're transgender.”
- “I'd date him, even though he's transgender.”

## Being outspoken

This section includes information on being an outspoken ally in larger groups, at work or at school.

**Speak out in support of transgender people and transgender rights.** Politely correct others if they use the wrong name or pronoun for a transgender person. More broadly, it is important to challenge anti-transgender remarks, jokes, and conversations. It can be scary to speak out, but loud and visible support for transgender rights can show transgender people that they are accepted, encourage other allies to speak out, and help change the minds of people who aren't supportive of transgender people yet.

**Support transgender people who experience discrimination.** Transgender people may feel that they don't have support from others when making complaints about discrimination or bringing their experiences to authorities, administrators, or others in position of power. Make it clear that you will support the transgender people in your life whether or not they decide to make formal complaints.

**Think about how you use gendered language.** Do you regularly greet groups by saying, “Ladies and gentlemen?” Do you have a coworker who refers to everyone as “guys?” Is there a particular gender-based joke your friend loves to tell? Many transgender people are fine being called ‘ladies’ or ‘gentlemen,’ but you can't know without first asking. Consider changing your habits to avoid making assumptions about people's gender or pronouns, and encouraging the people in your life to do the same. This can take time and effort, but is an important way to be an ally and support transgender people outside of individual, face-to-face interactions.

**Learn about policies affecting transgender people.** Are there any laws that protect transgender people where you live? Any policies at work or school that are inclusive of transgender people? It's important to learn more about the challenges that transgender people face and the goals of transgender advocates, and, if you're comfortable with it, even help push to change bad laws and policies or support good ones.

## Changing businesses, schools, and more

**Rethink gender on forms and documents.** When creating forms and documents, consider whether you need to include gender at all. Many times, we default to asking for gender without considering why or how that information will be used. If you do need to ask for gender information, consider using a blank space for people to fill in as they feel comfortable, rather than a boxes marked “male” and “female,” or make it clear that people can fill in forms in a way that matches their gender identity.

**Ensure everyone has access to bathrooms and other facilities.** Everyone should be able to safely and comfortably use bathrooms and other gendered facilities. Push to allow people to use the bathroom that matches their gender identity rather than what’s on their ID. In addition, providing gender-neutral or private bathrooms is a great way to provide safe and comfortable space for everyone (but never require anyone to use them if they don’t want!). And if a restroom is designed for just one user at a time, make sure that it’s gender-neutral—there’s no reason to make it a men’s or women’s restroom. Take down that “Women” or “Men” sign and put up new signs that say “Restroom.”

**Push for support and inclusivity, not simply tolerance.** A baseline of tolerance—allowing transgender people to exist—is an important start, but we can do more. If your school brings outside speakers or hosts events, make sure that some of them include transgender people and topics. If your business donates to nonprofits, look into partnering with organizations that support the transgender community. If your organization posts community events on social media, include some from the transgender community.

**Craft a transgender-inclusive nondiscrimination policy.** Shifting the culture of an organization takes time. Crafting a transgender-inclusive nondiscrimination policy can help clarify how your organization supports transgender people, and ensure that there’s a way to respond to those who aren’t supportive.

## Changing the world

**Call your elected officials.** Call your elected local, state, and federal officials to thank them when they do support transgender rights and to provide important criticism when they don’t. Visit [Make Your Voice Heard](#) for more information.

**Work to pass laws** in your city or state, and on the federal level, that outlaw discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, and education based on gender identity/expression. This could be as simple as calling your elected officials, or as involved as a letter-writing campaign or collecting signatures for a ballot measure.

**Change the curriculum** of medical, health, crisis response and social work programs, or bring in trainers, to teach these providers about transgender people and how to treat transgender people with respect and professionalism. Include information about the rejection, discrimination and violence that transgender people face and how to provide services and support to transgender clients.

**Work with schools** to make them safe for transgender students by implementing all the recommendations in our [Model School District Policy on Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students](#), and use the many other resources available in our [School Action Center](#).

**Work with homeless shelters** to make them safe for transgender people by implementing all the recommendations in [Transitioning Our Shelters: A Guide to Making Homeless Shelters Safe for Transgender People](#).

**Work with suicide prevention, HIV prevention and treatment, alcohol and drug abuse treatment, and anti-smoking programs** to ensure that their work is trans-inclusive and their staff is knowledgeable about transgender issues. Find trainers and teach them how to deal sensitively with trans people seeking assistance.

**Work with police departments** to have fair written policies with regard to interacting with transgender members of the public, regardless if they are seeking assistance or being arrested, and make sure all police officers are trained on following the policy and treating transgender people with respect.

**Work with jail and prison systems** to ensure the respectful and safe treatment of transgender prisoners, starting with implementing the recommendations of [Standing with LGBT Prisoners](#).

**Take a step back.** Transgender people come from every population, and are of all races, religions, ages, and more. There are transgender immigrants, employees, prisoners, sex workers, and every other category imaginable. Make an effort to be as inclusive as possible of all kinds of transgender people when working to support transgender communities.

## Putting it all into action

Hopefully by this point you feel armed with the tools and knowledge needed to be an ally to the transgender people in your life, as well as the larger transgender community. Remember: no one is able to be the perfect ally at all times, so it's important to provide as much support as you can and to learn from the mistakes you may make along the way.

Thanks for being a strong ally!