



Understanding Transgender People

The Basics

Understanding what it is like to be transgender can be hard, especially if you have never met a transgender person.

Transgender is a broad term that can be used to describe people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were thought to be when they were born. “Trans” is often used as shorthand for transgender.

To treat a transgender person with respect, you treat them according to their gender identity, not their sex at birth. So, someone who lives as a woman today is called a **transgender woman** and should be referred to as “she” and “her.” A **transgender man** lives as a man today and should be referred to as “he” and “him.”

Gender identity is your internal knowledge of your gender – for example, your knowledge that you’re a man, a woman, or another gender. **Gender expression** is how a person presents their gender on the outside, often through behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice or body characteristics.

When a person begins to live according to their gender identity, rather than the gender they were thought to be when they were born, this time period is called **gender transition**. Deciding to transition can take a lot of reflection. Many transgender people risk social stigma, discrimination, and harassment when they tell other people who they really are. Despite those risks, being open about one’s gender identity can be life-affirming and even life-saving.

Possible steps in a **gender transition** may or may not include changing your clothing, appearance, name, or the pronoun people use to refer to you (like “she,” “he,” or “they”). If they can, some people change their identification documents, like their driver’s license or passport, to better reflect their gender. And some people undergo hormone therapy or other medical procedures to change their physical characteristics and make their body match the gender they know themselves to be. All transgender people are entitled to the same dignity and respect, regardless of whether or not they have been able to take any legal or medical steps.

Some transgender people identify as neither a man nor a woman, or as a combination of male and female, and may use terms like **non-binary** or **genderqueer** to describe their gender identity. Those who are non-binary often prefer to be referred to as “they” and “them.”

It is important to use respectful terminology, and treat transgender people as you would treat any other person. This includes using the name the person has asked you to call them (not their old name) as well as the pronouns they want you to use. If you aren’t sure what pronouns a person uses, just ask politely.

For more information about transgender people generally, see [Understanding Transgender People: Frequently Asked Questions](#).

For more information about non-binary people, see [Understanding Non-Binary People](#).

For more information about how to be supportive of the transgender people in your life, see [Supporting the Transgender People in Your Life](#).