

UNDERSTANDING LGBTQ+

WHAT DOES LGBTQ+ MEAN?

Understanding the letters with respect and compassion

ARTICLE 1 • BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



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Understanding the letters with respect and compassion

"Hope will never be silent." — Harvey Milk

Introduction

The term LGBTQ+ is widely used today, yet many people are unsure what it actually means. Some worry about using the wrong language, while others are questioning their own identity and looking for trustworthy, compassionate information. Family members, friends, employers, teachers and healthcare professionals may also want to better understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ people so they can provide respectful and inclusive support.

Understanding LGBTQ+ is not about memorising a long list of labels or trying to become an expert overnight. At its heart, it is about recognising that people experience their identity, relationships and sense of self in different ways. It is about understanding that diversity has always existed and that every individual deserves dignity, respect and the opportunity to live authentically.

Language changes over time because our understanding of human experiences continues to grow. The words people choose to describe themselves today may differ from those used by previous generations, and that is a natural part of language evolving. Some people find labels helpful because they provide a sense of belonging and identity. Others prefer not to use any labels at all. Both approaches are valid.

This article explores what LGBTQ+ means, explains the different parts of the acronym and discusses why understanding respectful language can help create safer, more inclusive communities.

What Does LGBTQ+ Stand For?

The acronym LGBTQ+ represents a diverse community of people whose sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression differs from what has traditionally been considered the social norm.

Although terminology continues to evolve, the letters generally represent:

L – Lesbian

G – Gay

B – Bisexual

T – Transgender

Q – Queer or Questioning

+ – Other identities and experiences that are not fully represented by the letters above.

The plus sign recognises that human identity is diverse and that not everyone identifies with one of the listed terms.

It is important to remember that every individual is unique. Two people who both identify as bisexual, transgender or lesbian may have completely different life experiences, relationships and perspectives.

Understanding the Difference Between Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

One of the most common areas of confusion is the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity.

Although they are often discussed together, they describe different aspects of a person's identity.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation describes who someone is emotionally, romantically and/or sexually attracted to.

Examples include:

Lesbian

Gay

Bisexual

Pansexual

Asexual

Sexual orientation is about attraction and relationships.

Gender Identity

Gender identity refers to a person's deeply held sense of their own gender.

Someone may identify as:

A woman

A man

Non-binary

Genderfluid

Agender

Another gender identity

Gender identity is about how a person understands themselves.

It is separate from sexual orientation.

For example:

- A transgender woman may be heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual or have another sexual orientation.

What Does the "+" Mean?

The plus sign acknowledges that language cannot always capture the full diversity of human experiences.

Some people identify as:

Intersex

Asexual

Aromantic

Pansexual

Non-binary

Genderfluid

Agender

Others may choose words that are deeply personal to them or may decide not to use any label at all.

The "+" is a reminder that every person's experience deserves respect, even if it is unfamiliar to us.

Why Do Labels Matter?

Some people ask,

"Why do we need labels at all?"

For many individuals, finding a word that describes their experience can be incredibly validating.

It can provide:

- A sense of belonging.

Language to describe feelings.

Connection with others.

Improved self-understanding.

Access to supportive communities.

However, labels should never become restrictions.

People are free to change the language they use about themselves as they learn more about who they are.

Some never use labels at all.

That is equally valid.

Identity Can Be Personal

Every LGBTQ+ person's journey is different.

Some people know their identity from an early age.

Others begin questioning in adolescence or adulthood.

Some recognise aspects of themselves later in life after years of believing they had to fit a particular expectation.

There is no correct age.

There is no right timeline.

Identity is a personal journey, not a race.

Why Respectful Language Matters

The language we use has the power to help people feel respected, included and valued.

Respectful language does not require perfection.

It requires willingness to learn.

Simple examples include:

- Using the name someone asks you to use.

Respecting pronouns.

Avoiding assumptions about partners or relationships.

Listening without judgement.

Asking respectful questions when appropriate.

If you make a mistake, apologise briefly, correct yourself and move on.

Most people appreciate genuine efforts to learn.

Common Misconceptions

"There are too many labels."

Language develops as our understanding grows. Labels exist because people want words that accurately reflect their experiences.

"Everyone has to choose a label."

Not true.

Some people prefer broad terms.

Others use no label at all.

Identity belongs to the individual.

"Using respectful language is difficult."

Most respectful language involves the same skills we use in everyday life:

- Listening.

Learning.

Treating people with kindness.

Did You Know?

Many major professional organisations, including psychological and medical bodies, recognise that being LGBTQ+ is a normal part of human diversity. Research also shows that supportive families, schools, workplaces and communities are associated with better mental health outcomes and a greater sense of wellbeing among LGBTQ+ people.

Real-Life Example

Sarah had always assumed she was simply "different."

She never felt comfortable with the labels people expected her to use, but she also didn't know there were other ways to describe her experiences.

In her thirties, she attended an LGBTQ+ community event for the first time.

She wasn't looking for a label.

She was looking for understanding.

Listening to other people's stories helped her realise she wasn't alone.

She later said,

"I didn't leave with all the answers, but I left feeling like there wasn't something wrong with me anymore."

Sometimes understanding begins not with finding the perfect word, but with discovering that other people share similar experiences.

Reflection Questions

Take a few moments to reflect:

- What did you already know about LGBTQ+ before reading this article?

Were there any assumptions you realised you were making?

Why do you think respectful language matters?

How might greater understanding help create more inclusive relationships and communities?

Key Takeaways

LGBTQ+ is an umbrella term representing a diverse range of identities.

Sexual orientation and gender identity describe different aspects of a person's identity.

The "+" recognises that human experiences cannot always be captured by a limited number of labels.

Labels can be helpful for some people but are never compulsory.

Every person's journey is unique.

Respect begins with listening, learning and treating others with dignity.

Final Thoughts

Understanding LGBTQ+ is not about becoming an expert in every identity or always getting the terminology exactly right.

It is about recognising our shared humanity.

Every person wants to feel respected, valued and accepted for who they are.

Whether someone identifies as LGBTQ+, is questioning their identity, supports a loved one or simply wishes to better understand the world around them, approaching these conversations with openness and compassion can make a meaningful difference.

As Harvey Milk reminded us, "Hope will never be silent."

Hope grows when people feel seen.

Hope grows when communities become more inclusive.

Hope grows when we replace assumptions with curiosity and judgement with kindness.

Every conversation built on respect has the potential to make someone feel that little bit safer, more understood and more able to be themselves.