

UNDERSTANDING LGBTQ+

UNDERSTANDING GENDER IDENTITY

Learning about identity, expression and respectful
language

ARTICLE 3 • BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



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Learning about identity, expression and respectful language

"We have to be visible. We are not ashamed of who we are." — Sylvia Rivera

Introduction

Gender identity is one of the most talked about aspects of the LGBTQ+ community, yet it is often one of the least understood.

Many people have questions.

What is gender identity?

What does transgender mean?

What does non-binary mean?

How is gender identity different from sexual orientation?

These are important questions, and understanding the answers can help us build more respectful, inclusive communities.

Gender identity is deeply personal.

It is not something another person can decide for us or observe simply by looking at us.

Every individual has the right to describe themselves in the language that feels most authentic to them.

Understanding gender identity is not about learning complicated terminology.

It is about recognising that every person's experience of themselves is unique and deserves respect.

What Is Gender Identity?

Gender identity is a person's deeply held understanding of their own gender.

It is their internal sense of who they are.

For many people, their gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.

For others, it does not.

Gender identity develops from a combination of biological, psychological and social influences, and every person's experience is unique.

Importantly, gender identity is not the same as sexual orientation.

Someone's gender identity tells us who they are.

Sexual orientation tells us who they may be attracted to.

They are separate aspects of identity.

Sex Assigned at Birth

When a baby is born, a healthcare professional usually records their sex based on physical characteristics.

This is known as sex assigned at birth.

For most people this is recorded as:

Female

Male

For some people, variations in sex characteristics mean this is not always straightforward.

These natural variations are known as intersex variations.

Sex assigned at birth is one piece of information.

It does not determine how someone will experience their gender throughout life.

What Does Transgender Mean?

A transgender person has a gender identity that differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.

For example:

- Someone assigned male at birth may identify as a woman.

Someone assigned female at birth may identify as a man.

Some transgender people choose to socially transition by changing their name, clothing or pronouns.

Some choose medical treatment.

Some choose neither.

There is no single way to be transgender.

Every journey is individual.

What Does Cisgender Mean?

A person is described as cisgender when their gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.

For example:

- Someone assigned female at birth who identifies as a woman.

Someone assigned male at birth who identifies as a man.

Most people are cisgender.

The word simply provides a respectful way of describing this experience.

Understanding Non-Binary

Not everyone identifies exclusively as a man or a woman.

Some people identify as non-binary.

Non-binary is an umbrella term used by people whose gender identity does not fit entirely within the traditional categories of male or female.

Some people may identify as:

- Both male and female.

Neither male nor female.

Somewhere between.

A different gender altogether.

There is no single non-binary experience.

Gender Expression

Gender identity is different from gender expression.

Gender expression refers to how someone presents themselves.

This may include:

- Clothing.

Hairstyles.

Voice.

Behaviour.

Appearance.

Someone's appearance does not tell you their gender identity.

Avoiding assumptions helps create respectful conversations.

Understanding Pronouns

Pronouns are the words we use when referring to someone instead of their name.

Examples include:

She / Her

He / Him

They / Them

Using a person's correct pronouns is a simple way of showing respect.

If you are unsure, it is okay to politely ask.

If you make a mistake, apologise briefly, correct yourself and continue the conversation.

Most people appreciate genuine efforts to be respectful.

Common Misconceptions

"Gender identity and sexual orientation are the same."

They are different.

Gender identity is about who you are.

Sexual orientation is about who you may be attracted to.

"You can tell if someone is transgender."

Not true.

Gender identity cannot be determined by appearance.

"All transgender people want surgery."

No.

Some choose medical treatment.

Others do not.

There is no single transition journey.

"Using someone's pronouns is difficult."

Like learning anyone's name, using the correct pronouns usually becomes easier with practice.

Did You Know?

Many professional organisations recognise that affirming a person's name, pronouns and identity can contribute positively to their wellbeing and help foster a sense of dignity, respect and inclusion.

Real-Life Example

Alex always felt uncomfortable when people referred to them as either "one of the boys" or "one of the girls."

Neither description felt right.

For years they assumed everyone felt this way.

It wasn't until they discovered the term non-binary that something finally made sense.

Alex later said,

"Finding that word didn't change who I was. It simply helped me understand feelings I'd had for years."

Having language to describe an experience can often reduce feelings of confusion and isolation.

Reflection Questions

Take a few moments to reflect:

- Before reading this article, how would you have explained gender identity?

What assumptions do people often make based on appearance?

How might using someone's chosen name and pronouns help them feel respected?

What can you do to create a more inclusive environment for people with different gender identities?

Key Takeaways

Gender identity is a person's internal sense of their gender.

It is different from sexual orientation.

Transgender and non-binary people have diverse experiences.

Gender expression does not always reflect gender identity.

Respecting names and pronouns is a simple but meaningful way to support inclusion.

Every person's journey deserves dignity and respect.

Final Thoughts

Understanding gender identity is not about having all the answers.

It is about approaching people with openness, curiosity and respect.

Most of us simply want to be recognised for who we are.

For transgender and non-binary people, having their identity acknowledged can make a significant difference to how safe, valued and included they feel.

You do not need to understand every aspect of someone's experience to treat them with kindness.

Listening.

Learning.

Using respectful language.

Being willing to correct mistakes.

These small actions help build communities where everyone has the opportunity to live authentically.

As Sylvia Rivera reminded us,

"We have to be visible. We are not ashamed of who we are."

By creating environments where people feel safe to be themselves, we help ensure that visibility is met with understanding, dignity and compassion rather than fear.