

# A GUIDE TO BEING A TRANS ALLY



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## What is “trans”?

Trans is used as an umbrella term for anyone whose gender identity does not fully match the gender they were assigned at birth. Commonly, you may think of trans men and trans women, but this could also include non-binary people, gender non-conforming people, and crossdressers, if these people choose to call themselves trans. If someone’s gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth, then they might say they are cis, or cisgender. We would use this term because “trans” is Latin for movement or crossing, whereas “cis” means on the same side. Both “trans” and “cis” are commonly used in other areas, such as chemistry and when discussing travel!

## What is an ally?

An ally is someone who supports a particular marginalised community, even if they may not be a part of it themselves. Allies are very important in working towards equality and helping wider society better understand the experiences of marginalised communities. Allies are not all the same – they may do very different things to support marginalised communities based on their skills and abilities, and that’s okay! This guide is aimed to support people wanting to be better allies for trans communities, but you can be an ally to any marginalised group.

## **Can someone be trans and gay/bi/not straight?**

Yes, trans people are as varied in their sexuality as cis people. Sexuality is to do with who you are attracted to, whereas trans is to do with your own gender. A trans man might be gay if he is only attracted to men, or bisexual if he is attracted to more than one gender, or a trans woman might be straight if she is only attracted to men.

## **I heard someone call themselves something else, is that okay?**

There are lots of ways people might explain their experience of gender. As long as they're not saying something as a joke, then it's okay! You might want to quickly check with an individual if you're unsure – if you're unfamiliar with a term, or think others might not wish to be called it, you can ask the person if that is the term they want you to use for them. The important thing is to not then use that term for every trans person, especially if you think others might not like to be called it. Remember, trans people are as varied in their preferences as everyone else.



# What are pronouns?

Pronouns are the words we use to refer to people when we're not talking directly to them. Often, they have gendered implications when we use them.

We might talk about Ben, and how he has a nice shirt on, and how we might want to compliment him on his taste in fashion.

Or we might talk about Yasmin, and how brilliant her recent portfolio was. She has helped you before with your work, and you really admire her.

Or even we might talk about Alex, and how they recently got offered a new job. You're going to miss them in the workplace, but you know this was their dream job!

While you may be quite familiar with using he/him and she/her when referring to people, you might feel unfamiliar with using they/them for a single person. However, we use they/them pronouns regularly for single people – for example, you may be driving in your car and suddenly someone pulls out in front of you and gives you little time to slow down. They clearly need to get more driving lessons, if this is how they're acting! You hope no one else has to deal with their poor driving, and you're glad to be free of them when they take a turning soon after.

Our society judges gender very quickly based on when we first look at someone, and so when we can't see the person in the car, we automatically use they/them pronouns. Some people might just prefer for you to continue using they/them pronouns for them, regardless of whether you can see them or not.

We can't always tell someone's gender just by looking at them, and we know there are more genders than just "man" and "woman". Using they/them pronouns for people as standard before you know their gender or pronouns can be a useful way to avoid using the wrong pronouns by mistake. It's hard to undo years of your brain gendering people quickly, but it gets much easier to avoid doing it with practice!



## How do I know someone's pronouns and gender?

If you're not sure of a person's gender, often you don't really need to know. If you are having a conversation with or about a person, it's considered more polite to ask for a person's pronouns. You can ask the person privately "how would you like me to refer to you?" or "can I just check, what pronouns do you use?" It is then up to them whether they give you just their pronouns, or tell you more about their gender, but at least you have given them that decision.

If you do need to know their gender, for example if they are a service user at your workplace and you need to complete a demographic form for them, then do so as you would any other sensitive piece of information about a person. It is best to ask privately, and perhaps alongside other information you need to collect, in order not to single that aspect of them out as "unusual".





## But what if I make a mistake?

Everyone makes mistakes from time to time, it's just important that you acknowledge them and learn from them, as long as you don't dwell on them. It may feel terrible to accidentally use the wrong name or pronouns for someone, but continuing to linger on it or bring it up will only draw attention to it and drag out the discomfort for the person. Your best option is to acknowledge it, often privately to yourself, apologise quickly, correct yourself, and move on with the conversation. You will do better next time if you acknowledge it as something you can improve on.

The person may seem annoyed that you made a mistake in the moment, and you might feel that you need to assure them that you are trying. Likely the person knows that you are, but it might help to think of it in context for that person. Being called the wrong gender once by you could be easy to pass off, but being consistently called the wrong gender over a long period of time, multiple times a day, can become very draining for the person.

Annoyance you might perceive from the person is often not directed at you personally, but the general experience of being misgendered repeatedly. In the moment you may feel hurt, but you will get better at calling them the correct gender, and using the right name and pronouns. Getting used to it can be uncomfortable, but it's worth it for both of you when it becomes second nature to you!

## **I don't think I made a mistake, but someone said I did!**

Be aware that the trans and non-binary communities are very broad, and it might be that you accidentally said something to someone that you weren't aware they didn't like. The best thing to do is just to apologise to them sincerely, and if appropriate, ask if they could let you know why what you did was incorrect. If it isn't an appropriate time, or the person doesn't have the time to tell you right now, you can Google some key terms to see what others online are saying about similar situations. If you are struggling to find anything through search engines, there are plenty of organisations you could ask for advice. Some organisations work specifically with allies and will be happy to help you – flip to the back of the booklet for more information.

Avoid asking unpaid groups and services specifically for trans and non-binary people. They may only have time to focus on giving space to trans and non-binary people, rather than educating people. Often they receive a lot of well-meaning questions from cis people, and may not have the time or energy to answer all of them.



## **My friend is coming out to me as trans/non-binary, what do I do?**

If they are just realising that they are trans/non-binary, then you should think of it as a privilege that they want to share this journey with you. Coming out can be really difficult, and it doesn't happen just once. This is likely their way of saying that they want you to know their most authentic self.

You may have already guessed that the person was possibly going to come out as trans or non-binary, or it might be a total surprise. It is best not to say either of these things though, as it could equally make the person panic.

Open up by thanking them for letting you know, as you realise this is very personal. Tell them that they have your support, and ask if they would like you to call them something else, or use new pronouns for them, if they have not already stated this. It may be that they don't know yet, and you could encourage them to have an open dialogue with you if anything changes in the future, or they want to try out new names and/or pronouns.

Ask them if there is anywhere else they are 'out'. It may be that they want you to refer to them with their old name and pronouns in certain places because they're not 'out' there. It might be tricky for you to switch back and forth, but it is sometimes a case of safety for the person.

Check if there is anything you can do right now that could help them. Depending on how close you are to the person, they may want you to tell someone else for them, or support them to do this, or they may need practical help such as making an

appointment with a GP to be referred to a Gender Clinic, for example. It might be that they'd just like a hug!

Alternatively, a person might have come out to you as trans and/or non-binary, but this might not be a new thing at all. It might be that they transitioned years ago and they just wanted to let you know. As with someone coming out for the first time, thank them for telling you, but it might be a different conversation that is needed. Listen to the person to check you aren't going to 'out' them to people they don't want you to.

## **My friend doesn't seem to meet up with me as often now – are we no longer friends?**

Coming out as trans and/or non-binary can be a very difficult time. There will be certain “milestones” that they may feel are important to them, which can be very challenging to reach. These milestones could potentially be: coming out to family, coming out at work, coming out to friends, changing their wardrobe, leaving the house in particular clothing, attending trans and non-binary social groups, accessing a Gender Clinic, changing their name legally, starting hormones, accessing surgery, or applying for a Gender Recognition Certificate, to name a few. The person may want none of these things, or only a selection of them, and that's also okay.

However, the person may now be encountering barriers that they may not have previously, and you may not be aware of them existing.

We describe our society as being “cissexist”, which means that it assumes everyone is cisgender. Our society is designed to cater for cisgender people, and doesn’t often take into account the existence of trans and non-binary people. This can be something as simple as gendered public toilets – there are high rates of urinary tract infections in trans and non-binary people because of feeling unsafe to use public toilets, and so not going when they need to.

If you are worried about someone, ask them if there is anything you can do or alter to help them at all. This might be something as simple as going to their home to socialise for a little while, or they might just need some time alone. Let them know about the organisations at the end of this booklet in case they need help.

Let the person explore their identity at their own pace – even if they decide they aren’t trans and/or non-binary, then they will know they can trust you far more if you supported them through their journey, rather than tried to find answers for them. It can be difficult to see a friend or loved one struggling, but let them take the lead where possible.

# It feels like everyone is talking about trans people right now...

It can feel like you don't know where to turn for information about trans and non-binary people. What's actually written by trans and non-binary people? What's just opinion?

At the moment, trans and non-binary people are quite commonly talked about because the mainstream media has gained a curiosity about them. There seem to be more trans and non-binary people now largely because of the internet and social media making it easier for those with similar experience to find one another, or to find support groups, rather than feeling isolated and alone with their feelings. As the mainstream media picks up on this and talks more about it, this helps more people find out about other trans and non-binary people, and so on!

There have been trans and non-binary people as far back as there have been people, but the terminology we use now is fairly new, and different generations and cultures may use different points of reference for themselves. However, the concepts we talk about have always existed. It's just now people are particularly interested in them as they become gradually more understood and accepted.

Of course, some people still do not like the existence of trans and non-binary people, or just genuinely don't understand them yet. With the terminology you'll have picked up here, it's generally quite easy to navigate what is actually the voice of trans and non-binary people, and what has been written as an opinion about them. Try to go for the former first to make sure you are letting trans and non-binary people speak for themselves on issues that affect them directly.

## **I have a relative/friend who keeps making jokes about trans people.**

Jokes about marginalised communities can be harmful to them, and keep negative stereotypes going. They are generally built on misunderstandings of who the community are, and can often be challenged effectively by questioning why the joke is funny in the first place.

It can be hard to challenge people when they make jokes about trans and non-binary people, especially if they're people you care about. Often, it genuinely comes from a place of not understanding trans and non-binary people, and never having the opportunity to learn.

We prefer to call people “in” rather than call people “out” where possible. What we mean by this is we start from an assumption that the person just doesn't know why their behaviour might be harmful, and we want them to grow and learn with us. We hope this helps you too in how you might approach people you care about when challenging negativity around trans and non-binary people.

Support trans and non-binary people to the best of your ability, but don't put yourself in danger, and remember you can draw a line if an argument ensues. If the person refuses to acknowledge trans and non-binary people as their gender, then make it clear that you won't be convinced otherwise, and you won't engage them in debate about it. In doing so, it can help to show those you care about how serious you are on this point, and can let them think on it further.



## How do I show my support?

There are many ways you can show your support, depending on what is best for you and those you are supporting! As mentioned previously, challenging people's misconceptions around trans and non-binary people is a massive help. It makes safer environments for trans and non-binary people in those people's lives to feel okay to come out.

While not everyone has the money or time to spare, if you feel able to, there are some organisations at the back of this booklet that you could consider donating to, or volunteering your time with.

Share the work of trans and non-binary people on social media – they are more than just their trans and non-binary identities, and many are skilled artists and writers!

Celebrate when trans and non-binary people are cast in acting roles, and congratulate achievements made in politics, sports, the arts, and so on made by trans and non-binary people.

Listen to the voices of trans and non-binary people on issues that affect them, including when they speak about issues affecting other aspects of their lives. For example, Black trans people will have different experiences to white trans people, or Black cis people.

Trans and non-binary people's rights are talked about frequently at the moment – listen to what trans and non-binary people have to say about these topics, and support them to amplify their voices. Where appropriate, this includes responding to consultations to support the changes that trans and non-binary people want to see.

## All of this has made me realise I might be not as cis as I thought...

There's nothing wrong with that! There can be the tendency to feel as though other people's journeys are more valid or "important" than our own. You may feel that trans and non-binary people in your life are "struggling" more than you, and you may not want to draw attention to your own exploration. If you are questioning your own gender identity in any way, then you are welcome to access any of the support that trans and non-binary people in your life are able to access. Perhaps talk to the trans and non-binary people in your life about your own experiences – it might help you!



# Are there any more places I can look for information?

**LGBT Foundation:** [www.lgbt.foundation](http://www.lgbt.foundation), 0345 3 30 30 30

**Mermaids:** [www.mermaidsuk.org.uk](http://www.mermaidsuk.org.uk)

**The Proud Trust:** [www.theproudtrust.org](http://www.theproudtrust.org)

**FFLAG:** [www.fflag.org.uk](http://www.fflag.org.uk)

**Supporting BAME Trans People:** <https://www.gires.org.uk/inclusivity-supporting-bame-trans-people/>

**Including Non-Binary People: For Service Providers and Employees:** <https://www.scottishtrans.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Non-binary-guidance.pdf>

**Transforming Outcomes and other research by LGBT Foundation:** <https://lgbt.foundation/resources-and-information/research/past>

# Glossary

**Cis:** Short for “cisgender”, meaning someone who is the same gender as the gender they were assigned at birth. “Cis” is Latin for “on the same side as”, whereas “trans” is Latin for “crossing from one side to another”, or other kind of movement to somewhere.

**Cissexism:** The assumption that everyone in society is cis, and society being structured around this idea.

**Crossdresser:** Someone who dresses in clothes different to their gender. They may not necessarily identify themselves as the gender they dress as, or they may do for the period they are dressed in that gender. They may also use terms such as “drag king” and “drag queen”, though often these terms reflect more eccentric dress. They may or may not identify themselves as trans.

**Dysphoria:** The discomfort a trans and/or non-binary person may experience from society’s expectation of gender presentation and roles. Someone might experience dysphoria from a range of areas, including parts of their body, their voice, receiving incorrect gendered pronouns, and other perceived discrepancies between themselves and society’s idea of how they should be.

**Gender Identity Clinic:** In the UK, there are a small number of NHS clinics across the country that diagnose gender dysphoria, and can prescribe hormones, hormone blockers, and refer to surgery for trans and non-binary people.

**Marginalised:** A term to describe communities that may have societal disadvantages placed upon them, often based on their identity or social class. People may belong to more than one marginalised community.

**Non-Binary:** A term to describe someone who identifies as a gender outside of the binary identities of “man” and “woman”. This might mean they experience a fluid or fixed gender, multiple genders, a different gender, or no gender.

**Trans:** An inclusive term for anyone whose gender identity does not completely match the gender that they were assigned at birth.

**Trans Man:** A man who is trans, and was assigned female at birth.

**Trans Woman:** A woman who is trans, and was assigned male at birth.

**Transphobia:** Hatred, fear, or discrimination directed towards someone or a group of people because they are or are perceived to be trans.

We believe in a fair and equal society where all lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people can achieve their full potential.

This book is available in large print by calling **0345 3 30 30 30** or email **info@lgbt.foundation**

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