

LGBTQ Terminology

SEX: A person's assignment at birth, based upon primary and secondary sex characteristics (genitalia, breasts, body hair, chromosomes, hormones, etc.) as male, female, or intersex.

GENDER IDENTITY: A person's inner understanding of the gender(s) to which they belong or with which they identify. This is each person's unique knowing or feeling, and is separate from a person's physical body or appearance (although often related).

ORIENTATION: A pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions. A sense of one's personal and social identity based on attractions and the behaviors expressing them, oftentimes linked to the gender(s) of the person one feels these attractions towards.

ATTRACTION: Feelings and desires a person has that may cause them to desire to engage in physically, sexually intimate behavior AND/OR relationally, emotionally intimate behavior (flirting, dating, and marriage).

LESBIAN: A person who identifies as a woman, and who is emotionally, spiritually, physically, and/or sexually attracted primarily to members of the same gender and/or sex.

GAY: A person who is emotionally, spiritually, physically, and/or sexually attracted primarily to members of the same gender and/or sex. (Usually used by people who identify as men, though some women also use this term about themselves.)

BISEXUAL: An individual who is emotionally, spiritually, physically, and sexually attracted to more than one gender and/or sex.

QUEER: 1) An umbrella term used by some to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. 2) A term used to describe a sexual orientation that is not straight, without indicating the genders of the queer person or the people they are attracted to. Some people prefer queer because it doesn't reference the gender binary, and some people prefer queer because it can expansively include attraction to people of a range of genders (used similarly to "pansexual" and "bisexual"). 3) Historically and currently used by some as a slur targeting those perceived to transgress "norms" of sexual orientation and/or gender expression, but for others, a word that has been reclaimed as a positive and affirmative part of their identity.

PANSEXUAL: A person who is emotionally, spiritually, physically, and/or sexually attracted toward persons of all gender identities and biological sexes. The concept of pansexuality deliberately rejects the gender binary, the "notion of two genders, and indeed of specific sexual orientations."

STRAIGHT: A person who is primarily emotionally, spiritually, physically, and/or sexually attracted toward persons of a different gender and biological sex. This is another term for heterosexual.

HOMOSEXUAL: A person who is primarily emotionally, spiritually, physically, and/or sexually attracted toward persons of the same gender and biological sex. This term is now considered outdated and too clinical, and is not in wide usage when people describe their own identities.

DEMISEXUAL: A person who only feels sexual attraction to someone with whom they have an emotional bond.

ASEXUAL: A person who does not experience sexual attraction. While they may not experience sexual attraction, a person may still engage in dating, sexual activity, or other behaviors.

TRANSGENDER or TRANS: An umbrella term for anyone who knows themselves to be a gender that is different than the gender they were assigned at birth. Some trans people may have an alternate gender identity that is neither male nor female, and for some people their gender identity may vary at different points in their lives. Some transgender people modify their bodies through medical means, and some do not. Common terms that people use about themselves are transman, transwoman, and man or woman of transgender experience.

TRANSSEXUAL: A person who feels that his or her gender identity does not match his or her assigned biological sex. Some transsexuals, though not all, have sex reassignment surgery and/or take hormones to make their bodies look more traditionally male or female. This term, as well as male-to-female (MTF) and female-to-male (FTM) are now considered outdated and offensive by many and should not be used unless claimed by the individual.



Keshet is a national organization that works for full LGBTQ equality and inclusion in Jewish life.

GENDER NON-CONFORMING: A gender identity used to describe people whose gender expression does not align with societal expectations based on their perceived gender.

GENDERQUEER: A gender identity used by a person that self-defines their gender as queer or non-normative. Someone whose chosen gender identity is neither man nor woman, is between or beyond gender, rejects binary gender, is some combination of genders.

CISGENDER: A person who is comfortable in the gender they were assigned at birth. It is used to contrast with “transgender” on the gender spectrum. Cisgender has its origin in the Latin-derived prefix cis, meaning “on the same side.”

INTERSEX: A general term used to refer to people who have atypical sexual or reproductive anatomy and biology. Intersex is not a single category – many forms of intersex exist and within each form, there may be substantial variation as well. Variations may include the reproductive organs such as the testicles, penis, vulva, clitoris, and ovaries, chromosomes, and hormone levels, all of which can result in additional variations in secondary sexual characteristics such as muscle mass, hair distribution, breast development, hip to waist ratio and stature. The term intersex displaced “hermaphroditism”, which is now considered offensive, as knowledge and understanding of sex development has increased. Intersex continues to be widely accepted as an umbrella term referring to biological diversity affecting sexual and reproductive anatomy.

GENDER TRANSITION: A person’s transition can look and feel different; there is not one way to transition. Transition includes some or all of the following: cultural, legal, and medical adjustments; telling one’s family, friends, and/or co-workers; changing one’s name and/or sex on legal documents; electrolysis or laser hair removal; hormone therapy; different forms of surgery-including but not limited to chest and genital surgery. Gender transition is not a linear process, and is often influenced by one’s access to information, community, and financial resources.

PRONOUNS: An important way to respect trans people is to refer to them with their gender pronouns. Some people want to be referred to as he / him / his, some as she / her / hers, some as a combination. Others want to be referred to with alternative/gender-neutral pronouns, such as ze or xie (“zee”) / hir (“heer”), or they / them / theirs (“Max is doing well. I saw hir yesterday, and ze said to say hi to you”). Some prefer not to use pronouns and all and only use their proper name (“I saw Max yesterday in class. I thought Max gave great answers to the professor’s questions, and I thought Max’s questions were great too”). It is always best to ask someone, “What is your gender pronoun?”

HOMOPHOBIA: The irrational fear of love, affection, or sexual behavior between people of the same gender. Expressed as negative feelings, erasure, attitudes, actions, and institutional discrimination against those perceived as non-heterosexuals, or the fear of being perceived as non-heterosexual (internalized homophobia).

BIPHOBIA: The irrational fear of love, affection, or sexual behavior of people who identify as bisexual. Expressed as negative feelings, erasure, attitudes, actions, and institutional discrimination against those perceived as bi-sexual, or the fear of being perceived as bi-sexual.

TRANSPHOBIA: Irrational fear or hatred of people who break or blur gender roles and sex characteristics, which exists in both the heterosexual and gay communities. Expressed as negative feelings, erasure, attitudes, actions, and institutional discrimination against those perceived as transgender or gender non-conforming, or the fear of being perceived as transgender or gender non-conforming.

HETERONORMATIVE: The social, cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that privilege heterosexuality as the natural, normal sexual orientation.

CIS-NORMATIVE: The social, cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that privilege cisgender experiences and identities as the natural, normal gender identity.

ALLY: A person who actively supports and advocates for people who belong to marginalized, silenced, or less privileged groups without actually being a member of those groups. This person will often challenge or confront systems of oppression.

These are some of the most common English terms used in the local and national lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and ally communities-there are many others, and more are created every day. It is always best to ask individuals and communities what terms they use, and what those terms mean to them.



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