

PFLAG

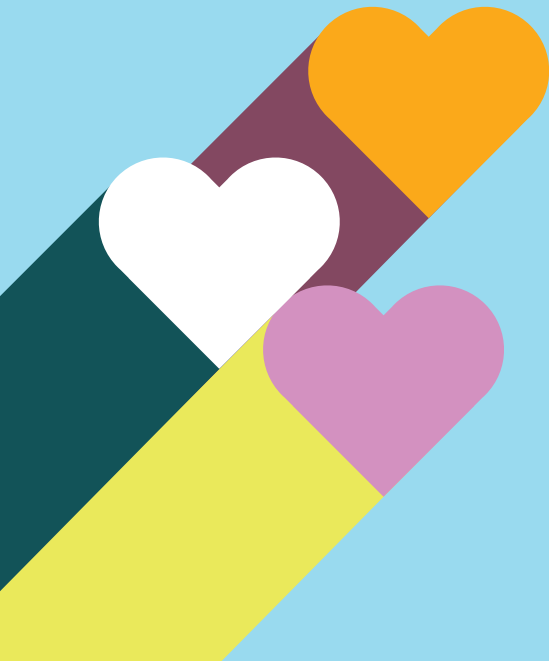
The incredibly detailed honest forthright completely blunt wonderfully helpful and witty exposition on a topic that makes some people stress because they doubt they understand it or know enough about it but they'll soon be ready to talk because this compelling and transformative (pun completely intended) little publication will answer lots of questions and start to demystify the not-at-all secret world of people who are transgender and nonbinary and become your tried and trusted

Guide to Being An Ally to Trans and Nonbinary People

Each of the stories in this publication has been taken from narratives submitted to the PFLAG National Learning & Inclusion team. In some cases, stories have been edited for brevity, and names have been changed, but each one is real and represents one of the millions of critically important voices in this conversation.

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INTRODUCTION

If there's one thing that we can say about being an ally, it's this: It's all about the journey.

When PFLAG National launched the Straight for Equality program in 2007, the mission was *straightforward* (haha). We wanted to create a resource for people who are not lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) to help them understand why their voices are critical to achieving equality for all, and to provide them with the education and tools they need to become engaged and active allies.

Now, more than 15 years later, we've created a library of resources that support allies in this work: developing their competency about what it means to be LGBTQ+, finding out about the experiences of LGBTQ+ people, and learning what it means to show up as an ally every day.

So far, the trip has been pretty awesome, but it's also been challenging in a lot of ways.

A lot has changed—for better and for worse—since 2007. Marriage equality is (at least for now) protected in all 50 states. People who are LGBTQ+ have some protections in the workplace. LGBTQ+ visibility has increased exponentially in almost every aspect of our lives. However, we've also seen a measurable increase in anti-transgender violence in communities across the country. Life-affirming and necessary medical care has been banned for transgender and nonbinary people in dozens of states across the US. We've also seen bathroom bans, book bans, drag bans, and so much more.

A QUICK DISCLAIMER

A few things you will not find in this publication:

- 1. Medical or legal advice of any kind.**
- 2. Detailed descriptions about medically necessary healthcare for trans and nonbinary youth or adults.**
- 3. A “debate” that questions the validity of trans and nonbinary peoples' lived experiences.**

Which only goes to show that there is still a lot of work to be done, and that brings us to our next step.

Welcome to our guide about how to be an ally to people who are trans and nonbinary.

Whether you come to this guide as a straight, cisgender ally, or you come to it as a member of the LGBTQ+ community looking to be part of the fight for trans and nonbinary inclusion, welcome. As always, we're honored and thrilled you've come to PFLAG National to help you on your way.

Equality Guideposts

Here are some nifty icons to help quickly identify things you might face on the way to becoming a trans and nonbinary ally.



Stumbling Blocks

Read a bit more about topics that even the strongest allies often have more questions about.



Phone-a-Friend

Get quick access to resources that can help you get past your stumbling blocks to allyship.



Your Invitation

Along the way, we'll invite you to try something new as an ally to trans and nonbinary people.

Equality Literacy

While you're reading this book, it's possible that you'll encounter terms with which you're not familiar. We've tried to provide explanations along the way, but if there's a word that's unclear, check out the PFLAG National Glossary at pflag.org/glossary.



CHAPTER ONE: WORDS. A LOT OF WORDS.

The conversations about gender identity and gender expression are constantly evolving and there are many ways to understand the associated terminology.

This publication is only one resource of many that might help you to understand the landscape. It's likely that you will meet people who interpret some of these terms differently, or that some of these terms will change, even in the time between when this book is published and when you read it.

That's ok. In fact, it's great!

Why? Because the evolution of language demonstrates the tremendous diversity in people's experiences and reminds us that there is no one definitive way to understand who we are.

It's helpful to have a shared language to understand each other; here are some helpful terms to know to get you started.

Assigned Sex

Assigned sex is the sex assigned to an infant at birth based on the child's visible sex organs, including genitalia and other physical characteristics.

Everyone is assigned a sex at or before birth, and it tends to be either male or female.*

**Some individuals may be referred to as intersex. Intersex is the current term used to refer to people whose bodies exhibit characteristics associated with both male and female biology. This can be through variations in hormones, chromosomes, internal or external genitalia, or any combination of primary and/or secondary sex characteristics. While intersex people can be assigned intersex at birth, many are not. It's important to know that intersex and transgender are not interchangeable terms. For more information on this term, please visit the PFLAG National glossary at pflag.org/glossary.*



When we think about the sex of an individual, it typically corresponds with what the doctor said the moment that individual was born—“It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” (Keep that in mind, because we’re coming back to it soon.)

Here’s the big takeaway: Everyone has an assigned sex based on physical characteristics.

Gender

Broadly, *gender* is a set of socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate, based on a person’s assigned sex. Gender, as a construct, helps us to understand what our culture and society views as “feminine,” “masculine,” or “androgynous.”

We hear about gender all the time, from limiting stereotypes about gender (e.g., women are nurturing while men are providers) to how they’ve traditionally influenced life choices (the nurturing woman teaches, the man works a high-paying job to provide for the family).

When someone steps outside the way gender is understood by their culture or society, it often causes some people to feel uncomfortable. For example, in the United States, the girl who didn’t want to play with dolls, grew up playing sports like football, and, as a woman, chose to become a firefighter might have conclusions drawn about her. People may speculate about her sexual orientation or even her gender identity (see this definition on the next page), because she’s perceived as occupying a social role reserved for boys and men in America.

When things like this happen, it’s a reminder to all of us about how deeply ingrained our beliefs are, particularly concerning the way gender “should” work. And most of us can imagine the consequences when someone (whether child or adult) steps outside those expectations.

And the takeaway for this one? Everyone—and every society—has their own understanding of gender.

Sexual Orientation

When we talk about a person’s *sexual orientation*, we’re describing the attraction they feel toward other people (or no people).

“Straight” or “heterosexual” describes a person who experiences attraction toward others whose gender is different from their own.

“Gay,” “lesbian,” or “homosexual” refers to a person who experiences attraction toward others whose gender is the same as their own.

“Bisexual,” “pansexual,” and other similar terms refer to a person whose attraction can be felt toward others whose gender is different from and the same as their own.

“Asexual” or “ace” refers to a person who experiences little or no attraction toward others.

Just like *assigned sex* and *gender*, everyone has a *sexual orientation*.

Gender Identity

***Gender identity* is a person’s deeply held core sense of self in relation to gender.**

Remember where we talked about being assigned a sex based solely on external physical characteristics? Gender identity addresses the internal characteristics and sense of self that cannot be seen physically on the day you are born. Additionally, gender identity helps provide language for people whose internal understanding of themselves does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. While at birth an individual may be assigned the term “male” based on biological characteristics and think of themselves as a boy or a man, that is not always the case. That person might not necessarily feel as though they are a boy or were intended to be a man. For them, there’s a disconnect that happens between what this individual sees on the outside (a male body) and how the individual understands themselves internally (as a girl or woman, nonbinary, or genderqueer).

The takeaways for this term? First, gender identity is a separate concept from assigned sex, gender expression, and sexual orientation. And second, everyone has a gender identity.

Now that you have a better understanding of some core terms, let’s discuss the variety of gender identities.

Cisgender

***Cisgender* (sometimes shortened to *cis*) is a term used to refer to an individual whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth.**

The prefix *cis-* comes from the Latin word for “on the same side as.”

Still fuzzy?

Try looking at the term this way: Cisgender people identify with (or are on the same side of) the sex assigned to them at birth. So, when we mention a cisgender man, we’re talking about someone who was assigned male at birth, and who uses terms like boy or man to describe their gender identity. Similarly, a cisgender

woman is an individual who was assigned female at birth, and also identifies as a girl or woman.

When you break it down like that, the term is useful. Also, cisgender sounds a whole lot better than “non-transgender” or—even worse—the dreaded, “I’m not transgender, I’m ‘normal.’” Using this term is also a great opportunity to create a teachable moment or start new conversations with other potential allies!

Transgender

***Transgender* is a term (often shortened to *trans*) describing a person whose gender identity does not match the sex that was assigned to them at birth.**

Transgender people may or may not decide to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically to match their gender identity. You will often hear people talk about transgender women (individuals who were assigned male at birth but identify as women) and transgender men (individuals who were assigned female at birth but identify as men). The word transgender is an adjective used to describe someone or some people, not a noun or a verb. Meaning, a person is transgender, but cannot be “transgendered,” just as they cannot be “gayed” or “lesbioned.”

Nonbinary

The word *nonbinary* refers to people whose gender identity does not fall inside the gender binary (more on this soon). They might exist between or beyond the concepts of “man” and “woman.”

We’ll talk a bit more about the gender binary in chapter two.

Some nonbinary people understand their identity as falling under the transgender umbrella and may also identify as transgender. Nonbinary, like transgender, is an adjective used to describe people, not a noun or a verb.

Did we mention that these are basic explanations? As in any group, there is tremendous diversity within the transgender and nonbinary community. People who have a different gender identity than the sex assigned to them at birth are part of an incredible spectrum of identities that are constantly evolving and changing.



STUMBLING BLOCK:

Coming Out, Inviting In, and Disclosure

The way we talk about the process of understanding who we are (in terms of our sexual orientation, gender identity or both), accepting our understanding, and then sharing what we've learned about ourselves has changed over the years. "Coming out" continues to be the most popular way to describe this experience for trans and nonbinary people, but there are alternatives like "inviting in" and "disclosure" that you might also hear people use.

There are a few more things that every ally should know about this process. First, for many trans and nonbinary people, disclosing information about their gender identity is a means of self-affirmation. The only way to ensure that the people in their lives use their name and pronouns is by sharing who they are with others. Even in moments when it doesn't feel good or safe to be out, the only way to be seen and affirmed is to invite people in and explain that identity.

Then, of course, there are a few more words that allies should be familiar with (and you thought the terminology section was done!):

Outing is a term used to describe the deliberate or accidental sharing of another person's sexual orientation or gender identity without their explicit consent. Outing is disrespectful and presents a danger for many LGBTQ+ individuals.

Clocking is a term used to describe when someone identifies an individual as transgender or nonbinary, when that trans or nonbinary individual has not come out to them. Sometimes also referred to as "being read."

Stealth is a term used to describe transgender or gender-nonconforming individuals who do not disclose their gender identity, whether in specific contexts (e.g. "I'm stealth at work") or in all contexts. You may also hear this described as simply "maintaining privacy."

Finally, it's important to remember that not all people who are trans or nonbinary can (or want to) be stealth or avoid being clocked for a number of valid reasons. As an ally, it's never up to you to decide if, how, when, why, or in what circumstance trans or nonbinary people discuss their experience of gender with others.

Gender Expression

So far, we've talked a lot about terms that are assigned to people, and terms that people may use to describe themselves, and much of the conversation has been about an internal sense of self.

Gender expression takes that conversation outward and is a term that describes all the ways we communicate our gender to others. It includes (but is not limited to) clothing, appearance, and mannerisms.

This communication may be conscious or subconscious and may or may not reflect their gender identity. While most people's understandings of gender expression relate to masculinity and femininity, there are countless combinations that may incorporate both masculine and feminine expressions, or neither, through androgynous expressions. Gender expression can also be fluid, with an individual expressing themselves in different ways at different times.

And, just like all of the terms that we've already defined, this is the takeaway: Everyone has a gender expression.

Think about the choices you make each day: The clothes you wear, the way you style your hair, the titles and honorifics you use. Those are all aspects of gender expression that every person chooses whether they think about it as gender expression or not.

One quick note of caution: It bears repeating that this is an ever-evolving conversation with countless perspectives. What you learn in this book might be understood very differently by others, some of whom may be trans or nonbinary. Don't suggest that you know the one definitive answer—or that anyone else does. Instead, listen to different perspectives. Follow people's guidance and respect the language they use. And always thank people for taking the time to talk to you and share their stories.



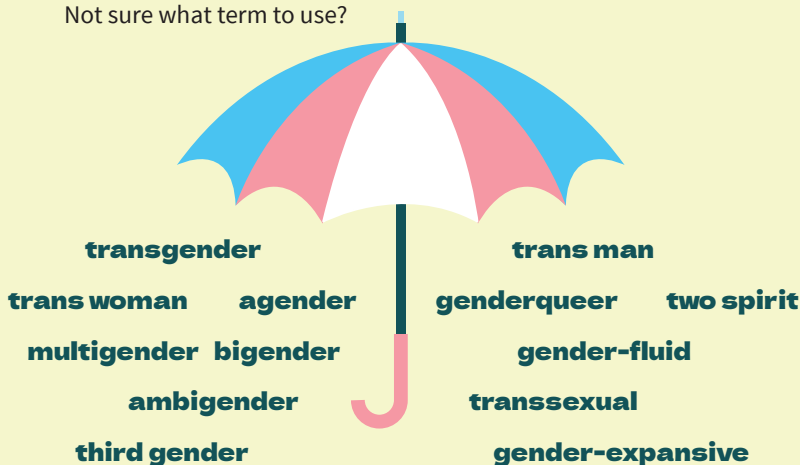
YOUR INVITATION:

Everything under the umbrella

Transsexual. Two-Spirit. Female-to-male (FTM) and male-to-female (MTF). Assigned female at birth (AFAB) and assigned male at birth (AMAB). Enby. Genderqueer. Gender nonconforming. Gender creative. Gender expansive.*

The diverse collection of ways that people talk about their gender identity (and who identify under what is sometimes called “the transgender umbrella”) is vast and always evolving. Some terms that you may hear are alternate ways of talking about being trans, while others might refer to specific identities that expand our understanding of what gender nonconformity means.

Not sure what term to use?



In general, trans or transgender tend to be safe places to start, but the best way to find out what word to use is simply to ask a person what words they’d like you to use for them. If you’re looking for additional definitions for words associated with gender identity, check out the PFLAG National Glossary at pflag.org/glossary; much like the language itself, this glossary will constantly evolve beyond this printed edition of these terms.



** Respect the language that people use—and don’t use—to describe themselves. Being an ally is about people, not words.*



STUMBLING BLOCK:

What words are off limits?

For allies, knowing what NOT to say can be just as important as knowing what terms are acceptable.

Sometimes words—like cross-dresser, drag queen, and intersex—are totally appropriate words used to describe beautiful and valid lived experiences. They're not bad or harmful words on their own. But ... they're not words that mean the same thing as the word *transgender*.

These words are not descriptive of gender identity, but of other identities or expressions. While there are some people who cross dress, perform in drag, or who are intersex who also identify as transgender, these words do not affirm people in the community as a whole and should not be used as interchangeable with words like *trans* or *nonbinary*.

Additionally, language evolves, and words that were commonly used a generation ago can be perceived very differently today. Words like *transgendered*, for example, can make people feel like their gender identity is something that happened to them. Terms like *transsexual* and *transvestite* were often used to pathologize trans people and their experiences (that is, to label them as psychologically abnormal or unhealthy). And while there are people who will still use these words to describe themselves, they can be offensive and invalidating to others. Our general rule? Don't use terms like these unless someone has self-identified in that way and asks you to use that term when talking about them.

And then there are words that just ... no. You know better. You know that they only exist to cause harm and hurt. This list includes outright slurs meant to bully, harass, and belittle, which are never OK to use, even in LGBTQ+ spaces. But it also includes any words that are meant to question the validity of trans and nonbinary identities and people's lived experiences. The general rule here is not only to not use words like that (ever), but also to gently correct others when they do.

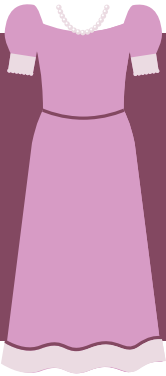
Not sure how to do that? You're in the right place to learn, and in chapter four we have some great advice about how to do it the right way.

CHAPTER TWO: CONNECTING THE DOTS

That really was a lot of words.

And we're just starting the conversation. But just like any vocabulary list, this isn't just about memorizing what different terms mean. The real goal is to understand how it all fits together. Occasionally, there's no better way to do that than to just draw some pictures.

For some people this is often what the world looks like:



FEMALE (Assigned Sex)

Gender Identity: Woman

Gender Expression: Feminine

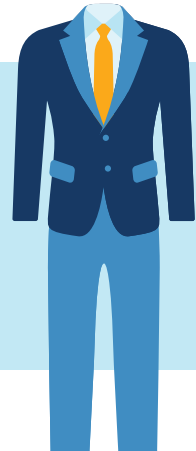
Sexual Orientation: Men (Straight)

MALE (Assigned Sex)

Gender Identity: Man

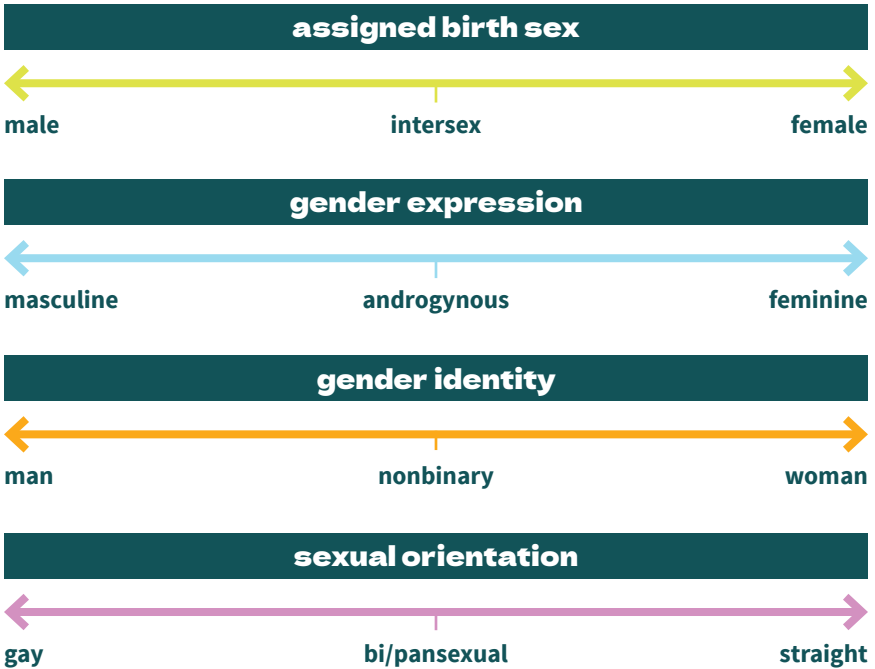
Gender Expression: Masculine

Sexual Orientation: Women (Straight)



This perspective isn't a good or bad thing—it's just what people have been taught and the experience that they've had so far. Acknowledging that this remains the place from which some people approach this topic is important to being an effective ally to trans and nonbinary people.

But we need to start looking at things differently. And we need to encourage others to do the same.



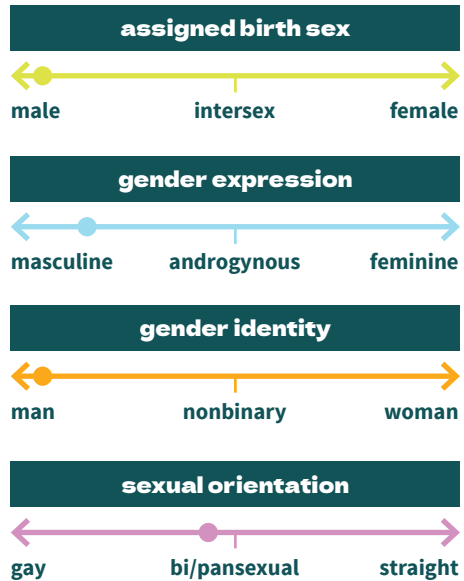
Admittedly, this version lacks the cute pictures, but here's why we think it's the way to go: it's a whole lot closer to reflecting the diversity of who we are, regardless of how we identify. Anyone can "map" themselves on this model if they want to.

Remember how we kept reminding you that, "Everyone has a ..." and then added terms like assigned sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression? That's because it's true. We *all* have these elements, and we *all* fall on different places on the spectrum of human experience.

So, let's look at a couple of examples to see how this works.

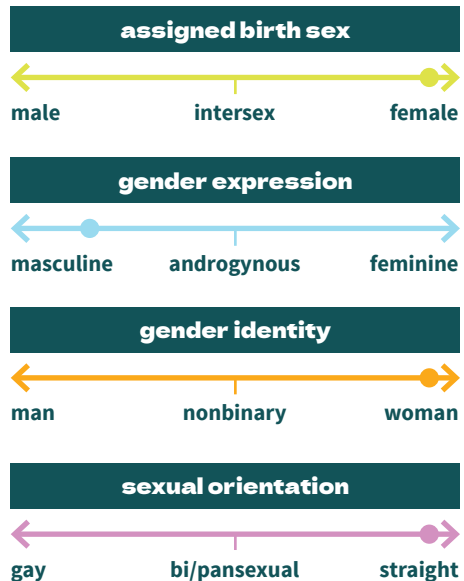
Miguel

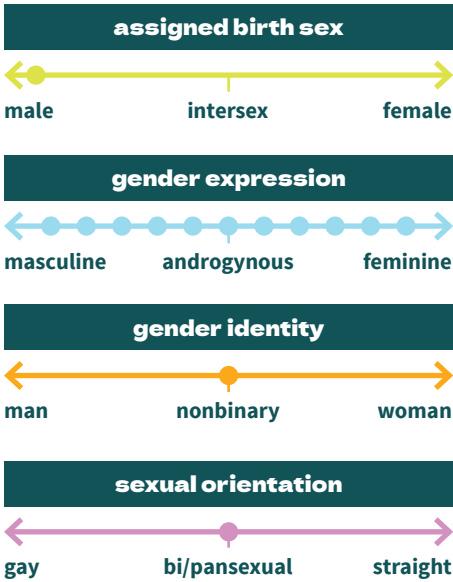
When we asked Miguel to map himself across these spectrums, we were able to get an idea of how he identifies. He was assigned male at birth, and he's always identified as a man. His gender expression has been typically masculine, and he is attracted to genders like and unlike his own. So, when we're talking about Miguel, by his own identification he's a bisexual, cisgender man.



Rose

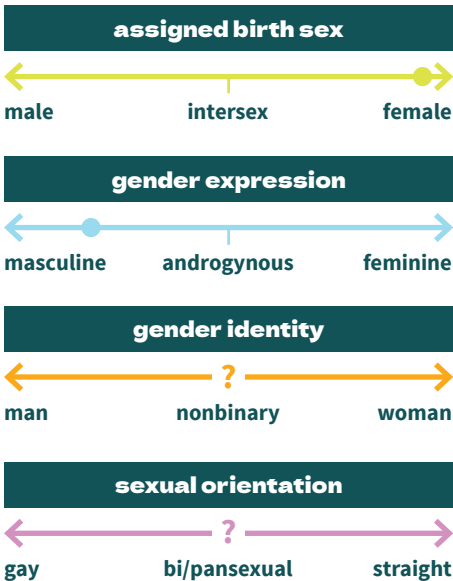
Rose mapped herself out as being assigned female at birth and has always identified as a woman. Yet when it came to her gender expression, she picked something that is considered more masculine in her society—she doesn't do dresses, prefers work boots to heels, and doesn't use makeup. Because of her gender expression, people often assume that she's lesbian or queer. However, Rose is exclusively attracted to genders unlike her own. She identifies as a straight, cisgender woman.





Sky

Sky was assigned male at birth, although Sky's never truly identified as a man and feels most affirmed when people use they/them pronouns. Sky's gender expression has reflected that: Some days, they will show up for classes in a skirt and full-glam make-up, other days it's all about donning a suit and bow tie, and on others, their clothes will be pretty androgynous, like jeans and a sweater. When it comes to attraction, Sky identifies as pansexual, because Sky is attracted to people of all genders. They identify as a queer, nonbinary person.

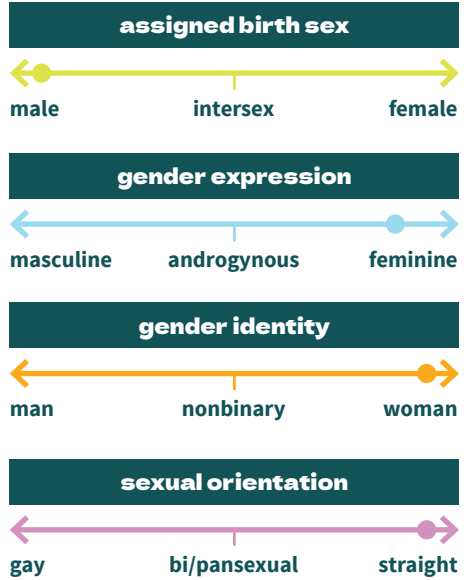


Suzi

Suzi is now four years old and was assigned female at birth. When Suzi was a toddler, her parents noticed she preferred trucks and dinosaurs to dolls and unicorns, seemed to dislike clothes that were sparkly or pink, and in pretend play was always the dad. Suzi's parents have allowed their child to continue to express herself, even in a way many perceive to be masculine, without criticism or censure. Suzi gives us a perfect example of how youth begin to understand and communicate their gender expression at very young ages. At the moment we don't know how Suzi identifies in terms of sexual orientation or gender identity.

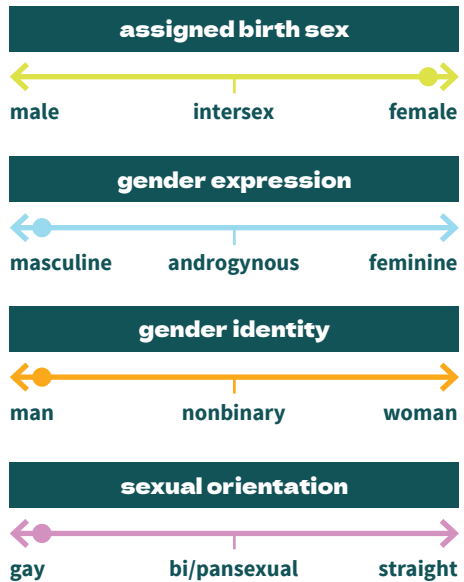
Monique

Monique's assigned sex at birth was male, but she never identified as a boy or a man. Even though she did not come out as transgender until well into adulthood, for as long as she can remember she knew there was something different about her. But she didn't have the language to describe her experience. Her gender expression has always been very feminine and even before coming out as trans people often assumed she was a woman. Because she is attracted to men, for many years Monique would've described herself as a feminine gay man. Today, truly affirmed in who she is, Monique identifies as a straight, transgender woman.



Mack

Mack's assigned sex at birth was female, but when he was a child, Mack let his friends and family know that he was, in fact, a boy. As a pre-teen, Mack socially transitioned, began using his affirmed name and pronouns, and started presenting in masculine ways full time. When he was in his early 20s, he began to medically transition and legally changed his name. Mack has always been attracted to other men. Mack identifies as a gay, transgender man.



These are just a few examples of how people might identify when asked to think about who they are when it comes to their assigned sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. The possible combinations are infinite when we move away from the belief that everyone must be on the traditional binaries.

An important take-away: One element is not necessarily a predictor of another.

Who someone is attracted to does not automatically tell us anything about how they understand their own gender or the ways they'll express their gender.

How someone understands their own gender does not automatically tell us anything about who they will be attracted to or the ways they'll express their gender.

And finally, how someone expresses their gender does not automatically tell us anything about who they are attracted to or how they understand their own gender.



YOUR INVITATION:

Ever spent any time thinking about how you identify?

Why not give it a whirl? First, download a copy of the chart we used at the start of this section at straightforequality.org/trans.

Then, go through the exercise and think about how you identify. Did anything surprise you? Are you certain your chart would have looked the same 10 years ago—and if not, what has changed? Are you certain your chart will look the same 10 years from now—and if not, why do you think that's the case?

One more thing: It's OK to acknowledge that this chart is imperfect while also recognizing that it's a tool that helps many break away from the gender binary. Is the word for how you identify not included here or impossible to chart using a model like this one? Use that as an opportunity to talk to others about the diversity of experiences and identities.



STUMBLING BLOCK:

What does it mean to transition?

When talking about people who are trans and nonbinary, you may hear the terms transition, transitioning, or gender affirmation. Simply put, these terms refer to the process—social, legal, and/or medical—one goes through to affirm their gender identity. This is not an overnight event, but a long-term process that may take years.

There tend to be three types of transition that people consider to be gender affirming:

- ♥ **Social transition:** This may include changing hairstyle, clothing, pronouns used, name, vocal tone, and other forms of external gender expression.
- ♥ **Legal transition:** This may include legal name changes, legally changing the gender markers on one's birth certificate, and updating identification documents like their driver's license and passport.
- ♥ **Medical transition:** This may include medically necessary healthcare options such as taking medication that delays puberty, hormone replacement therapy, and having surgery.

There is no “correct way” to transition—the word means something different to everyone. Many individuals are unable to transition for a wide range of reasons both within and beyond their control. Others may choose not to transition at all. The validity of an individual's gender identity does not depend on any type of transition.

For some teens and adults who are transgender—and have the desire, means, and opportunity to transition—their gender affirmation experience can be guided by the Standards of Care (SOC) developed by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH). The SOC serves as clinical guidance for medical and behavioral health professionals so they can assist trans and nonbinary people and maximize their overall health, psychological well-being, and self-fulfillment. This assistance may include primary care, gynecologic and urologic care, reproductive care, voice and communication therapy, mental health services, and for some, hormonal and surgical treatments.

For children who do not identify with their sex assigned at birth—and are “persistent, consistent, and insistent” in that identification—parents may support their child’s *social transition*. Parental support of a child’s social transition may include: calling the child by their chosen name and pronouns (and expecting others to do the same), allowing the child to choose their own hair and clothing style, and supporting their child’s pursuit of interests at home, at school, and in their community. This kind of social transition is completely reversible. Often, parents find these changes bring their child great comfort and alleviate the child’s anxiety and depression. What is most important for success in these cases (as in all cases) is the parents’ unconditional love and support of the child for who they are.



PHONE-A-FRIEND

Looking for more information on trans-related healthcare, including the ways transgender people transition?

We highly recommend the book *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, now in its second edition (available at transbodies.com).

For more details on youth-related social transition and other related information for children and youth, check out the 2022 update of *The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals Supporting Transgender and Nonbinary Children* by Stephanie Brill and Rachel Pepper.

CHAPTER THREE: WHAT IS AN ALLY, ANYWAY?

Let's acknowledge what we're all thinking about chapters one and two: that was a lot. There's no arguing with that. But stick with us, because now is the time when we add one more very important word to the conversation:

Ally.

Simple to understand, right? Perhaps. But by this time, you've probably figured out that we think that more is better when it comes to understanding who we are and the role that we play in equity and inclusion, so let's talk about what "ally" really means.

Over time, PFLAG National has developed a set of characteristics and qualities that allies—regardless of where they are on their ally journey—possess. Here's what we know:

- ♥ **Allies want to learn more.** They do what they can to ensure they understand the issues and challenges faced by people who are LGBTQ+. They also know that learning is lifelong, and allies want to stay on top of how conversations evolve over time.
- ♥ **Allies work on their barriers to being visible, vocal, and active in their allyship.** Whether it's fear of saying the wrong thing or uncertainty about managing conflict, allies are up to the challenge.
- ♥ **Allies are actively supportive.** And they know that "support" comes in many forms. It can mean something super-public, like covering yourself in rainbow glitter and heading to Pride with a sign reading, "PROUD ALLY"). But it can also mean expressing support in more private and personal ways through the language we use, conversations we choose to have, and signals that we send.

♥ **Allies are diverse.** They know there's no single "correct" way to be an ally and that we each bring unique backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences to this work ... and that's not only ok, it's powerful.

The process of going from "not my issue" to "let's change some laws!" rarely happens overnight. It entails learning more, building the confidence needed to have (and start) these conversations, knowing how to handle pushback, and being able to help others in their ally journey.

Behold, the Straight for Equality Ally Spectrum®:

THE STRAIGHT FOR EQUALITY Ally Spectrum



The
*"I'm not really
an ally...but
I'll listen"*
Ally



The
*"I'm starting
to get it"*
Ally



The
*"I'm starting
to talk about
LGBTQ+ issues"*
Ally

Why is this spectrum useful?

First, it acknowledges that allies can be found across the spectrum of support, from the people who say, “I’m not sure why we need to talk about this but I’m willing to listen...” to those who start to use LGBTQ+ terminology confidently and owning their allyship, to those super allies who are getting involved in LGBTQ+ organizing and living their allyship every day. Second, it’s a reminder that no matter where people are on their journey—if they’re putting in the work, they are allies. There are things to learn and things to do at every single point on the spectrum.



The
*“I’m focusing
my time on
learning”*
Ally



The
*“I’m getting
involved
locally”*
Ally



The
*“Let’s change
some laws”*
Ally

“In addition to being part of the community, I also show up as an ally by attending protests, name change hearings, being a safe place for trans and non-binary friends and mentees to vent to and assisting with funding for top surgeries and other care costs.

—VP

Finally, it gets rid of that icky feeling we get sometimes when we’re forced to prioritize who people “should be” over the traits, backgrounds, and experiences that make them who they are.

So why is this term so important? Why the “label”?

Even super-brainy people have taken on this issue. Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (ally status unknown) once wrote that, “Once you label me, you negate me,” suggesting that labeling any individual compromises their individuality.

But to us, being an ally isn’t a label—it’s a term of empowerment. It’s a state of being. It demonstrates who someone is and where their values lie. It communicates that LGBTQ+ issues matter to them in a powerful way. It’s a vocal and positive stand that clarifies an important point: while I may not be LGBTQ+, things like diversity, equity, inclusion, and access matter to me.

But wait. Straight allies, and cis allies, and allies with no specifics ... why?

There’s a lot of conversation about this, and it tends to sound something like this: if the point is that who you’re attracted to and how you see yourself shouldn’t matter, then why make such a point of mentioning it when we talk about being allies?

Short answer: Because it does matter.

Don’t get us wrong—the goal is that one day none of this will be relevant. But for now, *it is*.

Consider this: From November 2022 to November 2023, transgender advocacy organizations tracked the violent deaths of more than 335 transgender and nonbinary people worldwide. As of this writing, nearly half of the states in the U.S. have banned medically necessary care for trans and nonbinary youth. Only 27% of transgender youth describe their families as “very supportive” and 22% report being threatened with or subjected to dangerous and disproven conversion therapy. More than eight out of ten nonbinary adults report experiencing some form of emotional abuse as a child.

To change these jarring statistics, we need to have diverse voices fighting for justice. And that includes people who are not members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Allies have a unique power to make the case that being seen, respected, and treated fairly—in our communities and under the law—are things that matter to everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. And to make the case that laws that help or hurt trans and nonbinary people help or hurt all of us, allies need to own their identity as allies.

Which brings us to our last point before we move on. Can someone who is lesbian, gay, bisexual+, transgender, queer, or questioning be an ally?

The short answer? Yes. The slightly longer answer? Yes, and we'd argue that not only can they be allies, they should be, both within their community and to other groups that have also been marginalized. Transgender and nonbinary people need cisgender people of every sexual orientation to understand the unique issues they face and to be in solidarity with them, especially now.

So ... Where do we go from here?

By now, you've hopefully started thinking about your own path to allyship. There's a chance that you considered where you might be on the ally spectrum right now and what it would take to move forward. Maybe you've even started thinking about what barriers you might face as you strive to be a stronger ally to people who are trans and nonbinary community.

If you've thought about these things—or you're thinking about them now—we're on the right track.



STUMBLING BLOCK:

Assuming that none of this really matters

Some allies who don't have direct, personal connections with someone who is trans or nonbinary aren't sure if the effort they're putting in is having an impact. They question if the ways they show up are making a difference at all.

So, if you're ever in need of reassurance, here are just a few examples of allies to trans and nonbinary folk making a big difference in someone's life.

Atlas

Coming out to my grandma was intimidating. I worried she wouldn't want anything to do with me. I'll never forget the wave of relief I felt when she told me she would never stop loving me, no matter who I was.

Bennett

An administrator at my university didn't bat an eye when I was figuring out my gender. Just asked my pronouns and moved on. It made me feel almost normal. Her easy acceptance made a huge difference.

Jamie

I started a new job at a critical juncture in my transition when I had just started using my new name and new pronouns. An amazing ally took me under her wing without hesitation and taught me everything I needed to know about the job and the team. She allowed me to forget about being trans and to flourish on the job in a way that I didn't know was possible. She changed my life forever.

Janna

I don't believe that I would be alive today if it were not for the people who helped me in my darkest days. I was fortunate to have an excellent doctor and a psychologist to help me understand and survive my journey. The Pride Center in my city is staffed by so many caring people who reached out to me. And a woman I had worked with many years before became one of my strongest allies when I had given up hope.

Sunny

I have a longtime friend who is a Christian and I was concerned that I would lose her friendship when I told her about my transition. We have had many conversations over the past year, and she has actually become my best ally. She's open to learning as much as I am. This is all new to me and at times a bit scary. Most times though, I'm grateful for my buddy.

Katelynn

I have cousins that shield their kids from me at family gatherings. It's extremely painful to be treated this way, but my allies take that pain away with the unconditional love they pour into me. When I feel like I don't belong, they open their doors and share their space with me. I've found a new and improved family that will ALWAYS make space for me. I love them, and I hope one day I can show them exactly how much.

CHAPTER FOUR: WORKING THROUGH THE BARRIERS

“None of us can do everything, but each of us can do something.”

—Jana

Before we say anything else: encountering barriers to being the visible and vocal ally that they want to be does not make anyone a bad person, or a sub-par ally; it just makes them human.

In fact, in their work to become a better ally, most people will struggle with barriers they weren't even aware they had.

Learning new things takes time. It's a process, and mistakes will be made. Feeling a little lost is sometimes part of the journey, and that's OK.

Here are some insights into some common barriers that we hear about—and what you can do if you're facing one of them.

Barrier One: This is overwhelming and I don't know where to start.

“This is all just very, very new for me. I want to be supportive and affirming, but it's hard to challenge everything I've ever known about sex and gender. And it feels like this conversation came out of nowhere!”

How about we start here: We must accept that the way we understand gender is a complex thing. Gender identity and gender expression are nuanced and complicated and unique for everyone.

Our ideas about what gender is and the expectations we have about it start to have an impact on us even before we're born. When a sonogram technician or a

“The biggest challenge was trying to learn what it meant to be transgender, how sexuality, gender, and expression are all different, and that they are all a spectrum. I had to set aside my own preconceptions of those things and realize that nobody owes me any level of femininity or masculinity. People just are who they are and it’s my job to believe what they say. And I’ve learned to never stop learning and never to assume I know everything.”

—Kathy

doctor says, “It’s a girl!” there are often immediate assumptions made about what that girl’s life will look like. Many parents host gender-reveal parties and pick the colors for their nursery based on their understanding of gender. It dictates how parents will dress the child and what toys they’ll be given (or even permitted) to play with. The expectations we have about gender impact the interests and hobbies we pursue, the subjects we’re expected to do best at in school, our careers, and the roles we play in our families. And that doesn’t even take into account that some people have a gender identity that is different from the sex the doctor assigned them in the first place.

Further complicating things: in the 21st century we have access to information, resources, tools, and language that generations before us did not have. Which has given everyone the opportunity to better and more deeply understand who they are, how they experience their own gender, and how to communicate that information to others.

But this access has also given rise to disinformation and sensationalized stories meant to harm people who don’t conform. Whether we’re talking about laws that would force trans and nonbinary people to use public restrooms in accordance with their assigned sex and not their gender identity; bans on drag performances of any kind that have the potential to have impact that goes far beyond the stage; or policies that deny trans and nonbinary people access to athletics and sports; these “debates” are meant to divide us. They shut down new and potential allies from asking questions out of fear of being shut down, attacked, or shut out of the conversation entirely.

So, this brings us back to where we started:

Gender is a complex thing. But what can an ally do about it?

You can start by accepting that people have the right to define who they are, regardless of their assigned sex or your perception of their physical appearance.

Next, pay attention to how the rigid social understanding of gender is changing. Recognize that challenging the expectations we have about the gender binary benefits both cisgender and transgender people. Celebrate the ways these messages and expectations are evolving. And remember that we're striving for a world where the toys we play with, the clothes we wear, and the careers we pursue aren't dictated by biology.

There's a whole lot to be said about the power of setting a great example through our words and actions. When you meet someone who lets you know that they are trans or nonbinary, accept them for who they are. Respect the language they use to describe themselves and their relationships. Use their affirmed name and pronouns, no questions asked.

Finally, do what you can to dispel the myth that this conversation came "out of nowhere." While medical intervention and transition was not an option until the 20th century, across the globe throughout human history, people who are trans and nonbinary have always existed—some historical accounts describe an expansive understanding of gender thousands of years before the common era (BCE). Let's celebrate the fact that people have access to the language they need to describe their own experiences, have the confidence they need to share their experiences with others, and can access the care they need from trained medical professionals to affirm who they are.



PHONE-A-FRIEND

Learn about the history of transgender and nonbinary people around the world. You can start by checking out documentarian Susan Stryker's book *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, now in its second edition. Or you can make a commitment to learn more about people who understood gender beyond the binary in generations past including rulers or the ancient world, soldiers in the American Civil War, and those that rioted at Compton's Cafeteria and the Stonewall Inn.



YOUR INVITATION:

Use gender-inclusive language

Sticks and stones may break our bones ... but words can hurt forever.

While it may seem innocuous to some, gendered language can have a huge impact on how supported, welcomed, and affirmed people feel.

If you're not sure how someone identifies, don't assume or try to guess. Just use that person's name until you feel comfortable asking, they share their pronouns, or you're able to pick up on what other people are using to talk with and about them. And avoid honorifics like "Mr. and Mrs." or "sir and ma'am" until you know more.

In some parts of the U.S., phrases like "you guys," "my dude," and "bro" are considered gender-neutral and inclusive—we're here to remind you that not everyone thinks this way. Even the more formal "ladies and gentlemen" excludes our nonbinary friends, and may be uncomfortable for some. It's always best to ask before using these "neutral" phrases that imply that being a man is the default.

It's hard to change the vocabulary you're used to—and we mean that very sincerely.

It. Is. Hard.

But instead of using phrases that make people feel unwelcome and left out, consider alternatives that let people know that you're making an active choice to be more inclusive. Importantly, find inclusive language that works with your speaking patterns and don't be afraid to get creative. Whether that means common words like "everyone" or "folks," regional standbys like "y'all" and "yinz," more familiar words like "friends," "team," "pals,"—or even sillier ones like "kittens"—finding what works best for you is a powerful step that will help you get accustomed to making more mindful language choices.

Barrier Two: But I could say or do or ask something that is going to hurt someone.

“What if I mess up? Am I just going to make a situation worse? Will I offend someone? I want to be a good ally to the trans and nonbinary people in my life! Help!”

First things first. Take a deep breath. Take a moment to sit with this thought: you’re going to make mistakes. It’s going to suck. But don’t beat yourself up over it. The fear that you’re feeling, and the concern you have about other people’s feelings is a good thing, actually.

Were you having a conversation with someone and unintentionally used the wrong pronoun? Did you use an outdated term like “transgendered” in conversation? Or maybe you described a young person in your life as “gender-creative” when they use the word “nonbinary” to describe themselves. Here’s our advice on what to do next.

Step 1. Acknowledge your mistake.

Step 2. Apologize* and correct yourself.

Step 3. Commit to doing better.

Step 4. Move on.

So, this might sound like “Oh—oops. What I meant was “they.” I’ll be sure to put some more effort into getting that right. Now back to what we were talking about ...”

Or it might sound like “I had no idea that “transgendered” wasn’t the right way to say that—thank you so much for letting me know. I apologize and promise I’ll do my best to avoid saying that in the future. Now back to what we were talking about ...”

Or maybe “I’m sorry! I used the phrase “gender-creative” like my nibling does, when you’ve always used “nonbinary.” I didn’t mean to slip up like that. I’ll try not to again. Now back to what we were talking about ...”

Seriously, it’s as easy as that. Do your best to catch yourself when something goes awry and own it. And if someone calls you out, don’t take it as a personal attack; they want you to get it right and know that you can do it, that’s why they’re mentioning it.

**Not everyone who is trans and nonbinary wants to hear an apology every time someone slips up and makes a mistake. For some, focusing on the mistake feels bad and reminds them of past hurt. For others, an apology puts the responsibility on the person who has just been harmed to offer forgiveness. If someone lets you know they don’t need or want an apology when you make a mistake, believe them. Don’t linger on it—just be sure to put in the work to do better.*

“It was (very briefly) hard adjusting to using they/ them pronouns and to get comfortable asking people what their (or someone else’s) pronouns are. It took some practice, and I had to be forgiving with myself and build confidence that I was coming from a place of love. It also took practice recovering from making a mistake.”

—Frankie

But wait—there’s more. For many allies, the need to know as much as possible is part of their DNA. Get the terminology down. Memorize some statistics. Read narratives. Watch films. Get to know people. Initiate conversations. This is all good stuff. But when it comes to being a good ally to trans and nonbinary people, please remember that some questions are off-limits.

There’s no magic trick here. You probably already know what’s off-limits, because you’d be upset or offended if someone asked them of you.

So, what’s off-limits?

The truth is that there is no definitive list of things that you should or should not ask a person who is transgender or nonbinary. However, there are a few points that seem to have consensus.

Do not ask when someone “became” transgender or nonbinary.

This question implies that what changed was their identity, and that there was an element of choice in the matter. No one suddenly “becomes” transgender or nonbinary any more than they “turn” gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. For some trans and nonbinary people, understanding who they are, finding the language to describe their experience, and then sharing that information with others can be a long and challenging process. For others, who they are may be evident to everyone around them from a very young age. Either way, like sexual orientation, gender identity is an innate part of who people are. If you are curious about their coming-out experience, consider asking about how and when they realized or understood their identity (or something along those lines that respects, affirms, and validates who they have always been).

Do not ask what a person’s name “used to be” or to see pictures of them before their transition or gender affirmation.

If we start from a place of accepting people for who they are, then knowing who they were before is irrelevant. Sure, you might be very, very interested in what

your coworker used to look like or what your classmate's parents named them on the day they were born. There's no easier way to say this—you don't need to know. It's not information that is needed to be respectful of who that person is today and frankly, a person's deadname and pre-transition photos can be really upsetting to those who simply want to live their lives as who they know themselves to be. Satisfying your own curiosity is not worth hurting another person.

Do not ask people about what (if any) surgeries they have had or are planning to have.

Some things are just private. And honestly, how would you feel if other people felt entitled to information about your body that you weren't interested in sharing? And as mentioned previously, medical treatment—including surgery—may not be a part of every transition for a variety of reasons. Not accessing that type of care does not make them “less trans.” In short, this is a slightly politer (but still absolutely unnecessary) version of “but what's in your pants?”—which no one is entitled to know.

Do not ask people how they have sex.

Did we mention that some things are just private? Unless you're considering a romantic or sexual relationship with someone, and you're at the point of your relationship when that information is needed ... just don't.

That's obviously not a comprehensive list. But you get the point. And before we move on to the next barrier, here are a few more things we encourage allies to keep in mind when it comes to any other (kind and respectful) questions that you have.

Your desire to know something does not mean that you deserve an answer.

Your curiosity does not mean that a person is required to give you an answer. You must accept those moments when someone says, “I don't want to talk about that.” Don't pressure them or insist that they can tell you because you're a great ally and you'll keep things private. Don't try to guilt them by explaining how your very good friend, or an influencer that you follow online was willing to talk about their trans experience.

And if they seem offended by the question that you've posed? Don't get defensive. Just apologize and move on.

Give people the opportunity to decide if, when, and where they want to answer your question.

When you have questions, frame them in a way that allows the person to decide if they want to answer the question. If they do, allow them to set the time and space

for that conversation. Instead of asking a question like “What did your parents say when you told them you were nonbinary?” in a crowded space where you’re supposed to be networking, this might sound like “Would it be ok if I asked you about your experience coming out to family sometime?” That slight change in the way that the question is framed allows the person to say yes or no. It also gives them the opportunity to suggest grabbing coffee or setting up a one-on-one video chat or whatever they need to feel most comfortable sharing that part of their story.

Be an active listener.

If someone you meet, who is trans or nonbinary, is willing and able to share their story with you, listen. And we mean REALLY listen. Be fully present, Listen so well that you can repeat the last two sentences they said back to them. Ask clarifying questions, and please, please (*please*) remember that when someone shares a story of family rejection or workplace discrimination, it’s not an attack on you personally. They’re simply telling you their truth.

Express gratitude.

We hope this is an obvious one. If a trans or nonbinary person is willing and able to share their experiences with you, say thank you. For their time. For their energy. For their willingness to share. For how candid they’ve been. For educating you. Just. Say. Thank. You. This is emotional labor that they weren’t required to give, and it’s really nice to know that’s appreciated.



PHONE-A-FRIEND

Many trans and nonbinary people report that they have had to educate people in their lives—from friends and family to human resource leaders and doctors—about who they are and what they need. Rather than putting the burden on them, take the time to learn what you can on your own time.

For example, we’ve already mentioned pronouns a few times and will discuss them in more detail in just a moment. Before then, we’d like to encourage you to consider the following thought exercise.

You’ve just met someone named Charlie. Charlie’s pronouns are xe/xem. You’re pretty sure you’ve never heard these pronouns before in your life, and you definitely don’t know how to use these pronouns in a sentence.

Rather than making a big deal about it with Charlie or seeking out the closest queer person in the room to learn more—take the time to do a quick search on your favorite web browser. In this case we'd recommend searching for the pronouns xe/xem online, but all sorts of other search terms, like “neopronouns” will get you there. And if you're still not sure after that research, you can ask respectful questions like, “How would you like me to use these pronouns” or “How would you like me to address you?”



YOUR INVITATION:

Make this an everyone conversation.

Don't put the burden of sharing pronouns solely on people who are trans and nonbinary. Make it a part of the conversation for everyone. If you're in a meeting with a large group of people, share your pronouns while introducing yourself. If you're hosting an event and people are going to wear name tags, consider creating a space on the badge where people can fill in their pronouns (or, alternatively, you could provide pronoun stickers or pins). Online, you can share your pronouns in your email signature, on your social media profiles, and when you log in to virtual meetings.

If there's a trans or nonbinary person in that space, this is a great way to help them communicate their pronouns without making it a big deal or forcing them to out themselves. It has the added bonus of being a chance for you to subtly signal your support and may even give you the chance to talk about why you're doing this as an ally.

Barrier Three: I've been an ally for a long time. I'm pretty sure I've got this.

“I've been an ally for as long as I can remember. I've never met anyone who's trans, but my best friend is gay and, you know, love is love. I've honestly just always believed that people should be treated equally. And I don't even see gender, just like I don't see race, or any of the other things that are used to divide us. We're all just human.”

Well ... Good for you?

But also, we're not totally buying it. We are all taught to notice differences between "them" and "us," and that's not inherently a bad thing. How else could we celebrate the beautiful and infinite diversity of human experience? It's acting on those differences in a way that is unkind or discriminatory that's a problem.

So, first things first. If it's not already abundantly clear, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression are totally different aspects of a person's identity. None of these have any direct impact on the others. While people who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community have similar experiences in many ways, the experiences of people who are cisgender and those who are transgender or nonbinary are very different—regardless of their sexual orientation. And that doesn't even take into account the way that age, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, socioeconomic status, and so many other pieces of who we are impact people's experiences. Saying "I've got a gay friend ..." doesn't make you an expert on LGBTQ+ issues. And honestly, it doesn't even necessarily mean that you're an ally to people who are trans and nonbinary. There are plenty of people who fought hard for marriage equality who hold some questionable (and even horrible) opinions about trans and nonbinary inclusion.

Furthermore, making comments like "I don't see gender" sends a message that gender identity and expression don't matter when, in fact, they absolutely do. Our society has expectations about how assigned sex and gender "should" impact us. People see our gender expression and make assumptions based on it every single day. Cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary people all experience gender identity,

they are all subject to what it means in their culture, and they all grapple with what role it plays in their own lives. So, while your perception of gender may be that it does not matter, making comments like "I don't see gender" often minimizes or even shuts down people whose experiences are not the same as yours, or who might feel differently.

And there is always more to learn. Language shifts and changes and expands. Communities can reclaim words that were once meant to cause harm. Terms and phrases that were perfectly acceptable—and even preferred—ten years ago can fall out

"Not wanting to center myself, I sometimes step back when I should move forward and sometimes I step in when I ought to create space for others. I am not challenged by the hate – I know what to do with that. I'm challenged by showing up PROPERLY as an ally."

—Hannah

of use and can currently do more harm than good. And the issues that people who are trans and nonbinary are facing every day change, too. Since the original version of this book was released in 2015, a lot has happened. We have seen a ban on trans people serving in the military. States have banned transgender people from using bathrooms and other gender-segregated facilities consistent with their gender identity. Some states have made it a felony to provide best-practice medical care to trans and nonbinary youth.

So, we implore you, continue learning. Continue listening. And continue showing up for the people that need your support.



PHONE-A-FRIEND

If you want to continue learning and listening and growing your skills as a trans and nonbinary ally, here just are a few of our go-to transgender-led and centered organizations that support transgender and nonbinary people:

- ♥ Advocates for Trans Equality: a4te.org
- ♥ Sylvia Rivera Law Project: srlp.org
- ♥ Transgender Law Center: transgenderlawcenter.org
- ♥ Transgender Legal Defense & Education Fund: transgenderlegal.org
- ♥ Trans Lifeline: translifeline.org
- ♥ Trans Remembrance: transremembrance.org

If that's not enough to keep you busy, you can also find first-hand accounts from trans and nonbinary people who are brave enough to share their stories online. From LGBTQ+ storytelling archives like *I'm From Driftwood*, *When I Came Out*, and *TMI Project* to individuals sharing their personal stories on social media, allies have more direct access than ever to a plethora of powerful and unique first-hand accounts of what it means to be trans and nonbinary.

Please note that many of the personal stories shared will be difficult to read. They may include experiences of family rejection, substance use, homelessness, suicidal ideation, discrimination, intimate partner violence, and other forms of discrimination. However, they will also include experiences of determination, strength, resilience, and joy.



YOUR INVITATION:

Commit to taking action.

We at PFLAG National understand and know that visibility matters. But we also encourage allies to back up their visibility with action. And for those of you who are ready to get started, we have a tool that can help!

Here's how it works:

DOWNLOAD the “As an ally to the trans and nonbinary community I will ...” cards at straightforequality.org/allycampaign.

FILL IT OUT and print it, or purchase copies at the PFLAG National bookstore. Whatever works best for you. And obviously, keep your commitment—to learn more, share your pronouns, or vote for candidates that will protect trans kids.

POST YOUR CARD somewhere that others will see it. Maybe in your cubicle at work? Use a PFLAG National magnet to put it on your refrigerator? Take a photo of yourself holding your filled out card and post it to your social media feeds?

CREATE CONVERSATIONS. Answer questions when people want to know more. Start conversations about why you're an ally. Tell people about this book and share it with them (or get them their own copy). Talk about why the commitment you made is so important to you.



Barrier Four: I don't do conflict. Like at all.

“Conflict shuts me down. I'm really uncomfortable with the idea of having arguments and debates with people about this hot-button issue. And honestly—I wouldn't even feel safe talking about this with a lot of people in my community.”

This may surprise you, but we don't do conflict, arguments, or debates either. Because they don't work when it comes to transforming the way that people think or behave. It's extremely rare for name-calling, aggression, and raised voices to have a positive impact in moments of disagreement.

And you're not wrong. Having conversations about the complexity of gender identity and gender expression feels more dangerous today than it did a decade ago; we've alluded to this several times already. But there has been a concerted effort to vilify trans and nonbinary people that relies on decades-old stereotypes and vitriol. And it feels like those that are opposed to LGBTQ+ equality aren't willing to listen or to learn.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. It certainly doesn't mean that you should let anti-trans comments, jokes, and misinformation slide. When you do, that bad behavior is seen as acceptable, and it's not.

You don't have to make a scene, call anyone a name, or even raise your voice. But as an ally, you have a responsibility to commit to trying to have a conversation. Hopefully that's a little less scary. It certainly tends to deliver better results.

A huge disclaimer though ... your safety comes first. Of course, we're talking about physical safety—if you ever feel like showing up as a visible and vocal ally will put you in physical danger, remove yourself from that situation as quickly as possible. But we're also talking about psychological safety. You don't have to beat yourself up if you recognize a no-win situation and need to walk away for your emotional well-being. Stepping out of your comfort zone does not have to mean stepping into a hornet's nest.

But in those moments where you feel safe, and you feel like there is potential in the conversation, you need to assert yourself, though always with kindness.

You're in a conversation with a family member. A friend. A colleague. A stranger. And they've just said something that's not OK with you. Perhaps they said an outdated term. Or used a slur. Or shared something about gender identity that you know is not true. Or maybe they were just being downright mean. In those moments, consider the following steps.

Take a deep breath.

If someone has said something that made you very upset, give yourself a moment to calm down. Don't respond immediately in anger. Slow down and think about what comes out of your mouth next; you don't want to shut the conversation down entirely.

“Raising my trans child has been the easiest job I have ever had. The challenge is not having a supportive family. We have lost so many family members from simply loving our child.”

—Jessicka

Don't make assumptions.

We want to be able to say that you should assume good intent, but in this case, we can't. So instead, assume nothing. You don't always know why they used the word that they did or where they learned that misinformation. Sure, it may be outright transphobia (a word you'll rarely if ever hear PFLAG National use, because it tends to shut down conversations like the one you're about to have). But it also might be because they didn't know any better, they weren't aware that the word they used was hurtful, or they thought people would know they meant it as a joke. Give people room to explain.

Use the “ouch and educate” model.

While it works in some situations, we're not actually recommending that you say the word “ouch” out loud here. But rather, when somebody says or does something that upsets you, you take the time to pause, explain how and why something impacted you (ouch), and provide some suggestions for how to do better in the future (educate).

Pick the right time and place.

Context matters. In some cases, if what was said or done was really rough, you may have an obligation to say something right then and there. For example, let's say you are the senior member of your team at work, and you were hosting a meeting. During a short break in a room full of people, someone used a well-known and offensive slur to talk about trans people. You might say something like “Hold on a sec. As per our code of conduct—we don't use words like that here. If you continue to speak in that way, you'll be asked to leave the room and we'll be having a conversation with HR before the day is done.” In that situation not only does the person who used that word need to be corrected, but everyone in the room also needs to know that behavior like that won't be tolerated.

At other times, when what happened was less egregious (or when you need that moment to calm down and collect your thoughts) following up in a one-on-one conversation might make more sense. Let's say you're out with a group of friends and you overhear someone say that being nonbinary is just a fad and we probably won't be talking about it in a few years. You don't want to disrupt everyone's afternoon and the conversation has already moved on. In that case, you could give that person a call or ask them out for coffee to talk about what happened. You might say something like “Hey friend. You said something about trans and nonbinary people the other day that really bothered me. I have a family member who is nonbinary and what you said simply isn't true. I'm telling you this because I assume you didn't mean to hurt me or anyone else in the room and I really want to encourage you to learn more. Here's a resource that really helped me.”

Address the behavior (not their character).

Another important thing to keep in mind is to address a specific behavior and not who a person fundamentally is. In both examples above, there's no name calling, or attack on the person's character, no accusations of transphobia or bigotry. Instead, the focus was on a specific behavior. "The word you used is not OK" or "The misinformation you shared really bothered me." Behavior can and should be addressed, because it's something that people can correct—but they likely won't be inclined to if you've called them names in front of a large group of people, or made broad generalizations about who they are based on a single action.

Give them space to respond.

If you have taken the time to gently point out to someone their unkind behavior, make sure that you are also prepared to listen to what they have to say. After you've told them what upset you and how to avoid things like that in the future, give them space to share their thoughts.

Maybe they'll apologize immediately and thank you for correcting their mistake. Maybe they'll ask you for more information after they tell you they didn't realize how that comment would hurt anyone. Maybe they'll simply commit to doing better in the future. All of those options will give you the opportunity to have a meaningful and productive conversation.

Or maybe they'll dig in their heels and double down on their unkind behavior. Maybe they'll start asking wild, hypothetical questions that have little or no basis in reality. Maybe they'll spread even more misinformation, citing unreliable sources while admitting they don't have any expertise on the topic. You'll probably need to make a quick assessment in those situations—but sometimes your best option may be to just leave the conversation.

Set your expectations for the future.

Look. We'll be really honest here. When you find yourself having a difficult conversation and you feel like you're at an impasse, it can be really uncomfortable. Agreeing to disagree can feel anticlimactic, almost like a failure. It is so much harder to differentiate between people's behaviors and beliefs in a time when literal lives are at stake.

But in a way we're going to suggest doing just that.

In some situations, for your own emotional well-being, it might make the most sense to agree to disagree. If someone refuses to be a part of a productive conversation, if they refuse to learn more about a particular issue, if they are clearly acting in a way that is malicious and intended to harm—you are entitled to leave the conversation to protect yourself and the trans and nonbinary people that you care about.

HOWEVER. Agreeing to disagree does not mean that you can't set expectations for how that person will behave while you are together. This might sound something like:

“Everyone is entitled to their beliefs, but while you’re here at work, you will be expected to behave in a way that is respectful and kind. If you’re not able to do that there may be consequences (e.g., you’ll be written up, I’ll be reporting you to HR, you could lose your position at this organization).”

“Look—I can tell I’m not going to change your mind on this. But if you would like to spend time in my home, with my children, you’ll need to work a lot harder to use my daughter’s affirmed name and pronouns. You won’t be welcome back until you do.”

“Fine. We’ll agree to disagree. But if you continue to act the way you are right now, I’m going to have to rethink our relationship. And the next time you use that word I will leave the conversation.”

Sure, people are entitled to their beliefs. But you are entitled to set the boundaries that make you and your loved ones feel safe in response to those beliefs.

Say thank you.

Being called out, gently or otherwise, never feels good. So, if you’ve taken the time to have that tough conversation with someone, and they’ve been actively participating in the conversation and expressed a willingness to change, say thank you. Gratitude can go a long way in letting a person know that you can see the effort that they are making, that you’ll be a resource to them if they have questions, and that your relationship isn’t irreparably damaged by one challenging moment.

“The biggest challenge that I have seen is people who are unwilling to learn anything new. The people who refuse because they think they already know everything. I don’t waste my time with them. I learn so that I can reach the people who are willing.”

—Jenn



PHONE-A-FRIEND

If you're really worried about experiencing conflict when you're a visible and vocal trans and nonbinary ally, there are plenty of resources that can help you feel more confident when those tough moments arise. For example:

PFLAG National has offered a number of learning sessions from our PFLAG Academy Online program, to help our members build their communications and conflict resolution skills, available on demand at pflag.org/onlineacademy. We also have talking points and data on issues currently impacting trans and nonbinary people available at pflag.org/jointhefight.

The Movement Advancement Project has a series of messaging guides that it calls the "Talking About LGBTQ Issues" series. The ACLU has similar resources available on topics that impact trans and nonbinary youth.

Check them out to learn more.



YOUR INVITATION:

Try role-playing activities.

There's a reason that the ABC show, *What Would You Do*, is still on the air in 2024. And as an individual or small group exercise, you'd be surprised how well being presented with and then considering how you'd react in certain situations works. When you're faced with simple-but-tough, real-world scenarios and asked "What would you do?" so many different factors come into play.

Whether you're considering what to do when someone uses the wrong pronouns when your nonbinary friend is wearing a dress, refuses to affirm a coworker's pronouns because they "just don't get it," or makes threatening comments about what they'd do if they saw a trans person using a public restroom, thinking through how you'd react and coming up with a plan of action will help you feel more confident if a situation like this arises.

CHAPTER FIVE: GOING FURTHER ON YOUR ALLY JOURNEY

Can we be real with you? For a long time, PFLAG National’s Straight for Equality program made a “no politics” promise. And we still do. Sort of.

We continue to believe that starting conversations with new and potential allies with advocacy and politics isn’t the smartest plan of action. When people are still learning basic terminology and why their support is even needed, we need to focus on the lives of real people and not the depersonalized messaging we hear through campaigns and in the media. We also fundamentally disagree with the idea that conversations about diversity, equity, inclusion, and access are, by definition, political.

But ... the era of the “no politics” promise has come to an end. Because if there was ever a time that people who are trans and nonbinary needed their allies to show up for them in the voting booth, in city halls, in state houses, in Washington DC, and maybe even in the streets, it’s right now. Other examples have been shared throughout this guide, but ... did you know that in 2022 the FBI recorded 469 single-bias motivated incidents that were based on the victim’s gender identity? Did you know that in 2023, more than 500 bills with anti-trans content were introduced in state legislatures? Did you know that more than eight in ten trans and nonbinary people of all ages say that recent debates on these bills in

“My biggest challenge was ignorance. I did not know what it meant to be a true ally. That in order to truly call yourself an ally you must ACT. You must roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty. You have to actively step into the fight in both small and big ways.”

—Brianna

state houses have had a negative impact on their physical and mental health? And did you know that more than half of trans and nonbinary adults would consider moving (or have already moved) if their state passed a medical care ban for trans and nonbinary youth?

Did you know that your voice and your vote can help change this situation?

Because it can. And right now, we are in a moment of crisis. Your voice is needed to help see us through to the other side. What that means will likely depend on where you are on your own ally journey.

If you're just getting started, you might consider signing up to receive PFLAG National action alerts and information (pflag.org/jointhefight) or to get action alerts from your statewide equality group (equalityfederation.org/federation-members) and taking the time to sign petitions or send pre-drafted emails to your elected officials letting them know where you stand.

If you're a little bit further on in your work, maybe you'll make calls to your elected officials so often that their staff know it's you as soon as they hear your voice. They'll know where you stand on issues related to trans and nonbinary equality and that if they're in need of additional information on a particular topic that you can be a trusted resource.

If you're a super-ally, you'll show up "in the streets." Whether that means attending school and library board meetings to stop book bans, participating in a lobby day event in your state capital, or showing up at rallies and marches in support of trans and nonbinary people, you can be a presence in your community fighting for human rights.

And no matter what, if you're eligible and able, you can show up to vote for candidates that won't support legislation that's harmful to people who are trans and nonbinary.

“Stand up for our rights. Submit testimony. Correct people who misgender others. Donate books to libraries. Help others find their own confidence to be themselves.”

—Orion



PHONE-A-FRIEND

When it comes to research on the experiences of trans and nonbinary people, there are unfortunately still some major gaps that exist. As allies, we should do what we can to encourage well-funded, peer-reviewed data collection and research that will help us understand the disparities that exist and the most effective ways to support and affirm people.

In the meantime, there are a number of phenomenal organizations that are doing what they can to fill the gaps. These include:

- ♥ US Trans Survey: ustranssurvey.org
- ♥ Center for American Progress: americanprogress.org
- ♥ GLSEN: glsen.org/research
- ♥ Movement Advancement Project: www.lgbtmap.org
- ♥ Trevor Project: thetrevorproject.org/research
- ♥ Williams Institute at UCLA: williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu



YOUR INVITATION:

Make the case for inclusive pronouns

We've already talked quite a bit about pronouns and how important it is for allies to respect and affirm the pronouns that people share with you. But did you know that this kind of respect and affirmation can be lifesaving? Research consistently shows that when trans and nonbinary young people have their pronouns affirmed, they are significantly less likely to experience suicidal ideation and behavior. With that in mind, we're going to respond to common pushback so that you can make the case that everyone should put effort into getting this right.

“This is so uniquely American. I bet they’re not talking about pronouns anywhere else in the world!”

This pushback is not based in fact. State bodies in Germany have been mandated to use gender-neutral language in their paperwork

for nearly a decade. Spanish speakers have suggested alternative case endings like -e, -x, and -@ as alternatives to -o and -a. In places where modern standard Arabic is spoken there has been a movement to use “huma” and “intuma” as gender-neutral alternatives. Conversations about gender-inclusive language have been happening around the globe for years and to claim otherwise is simply untrue.

“But using they and them as a singular pronoun is grammatically incorrect!”

Also wrong. Don’t believe us? Ask the dictionary. And Jane Austen, Shakespeare, and Chaucer.

They and *them* have been in use as singular pronouns since at least the 1300s. And you yourself have probably done this already! Let’s imagine we were in a room together and someone left a cellphone on the table. You wouldn’t say, “I hope that he or she remembers where he or she left his or her cellphone.” You’d probably say, “Someone left their cell phone on the table; I hope they remember they left it here.” If that’s not enough, ask yourself what’s more important: grammar or someone’s life and wellbeing? The answer seems clear to us.

“It sounds like you just made that up. We don’t even have pronouns in this house!”

Miriam Webster defines pronouns as:

Any of a small set of words (such as I, she, he, you, it, we, or they) in a language that are used as substitutes for nouns or noun phrases and whose referents are named or understood in the context.

It probably doesn’t need to be said, but in that pushback alone, a person used five different pronouns (it, you, that, we, and this). However, a variety of factors have caused some people to believe this conversation about pronouns is only about LGBTQ+ people and their allies. If reminding someone that he and she (and I and you) are pronouns doesn’t work, start asking them how they’d feel if someone constantly used the wrong pronouns when talking with or about them. What if someone regularly misgendered someone they cared about? Helping to build that sense of empathy for others can really help.

“If we start using all these fancy new pronouns our clients/family/ etc. won’t like it!”

You’d be surprised. This conversation about pronouns is happening almost everywhere you can think of. And that’s because when this becomes an everyone conversation, everyone benefits. Having the ability to include pronouns in an email signature or on a nametag can be helpful for people with names like Cameron or Jesse. Asking people to share their pronouns as a part of their verbal introductions can be helpful when working globally since many of us are unfamiliar with how names are gendered in other cultures. And giving people more expansive options to choose from until they are certain of how someone identifies can be equally beneficial to cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary people who do not conform to gender stereotypes.

“Gender-neutral language is trendy right now. We won’t even be talking about this in five years.”

We’re not psychics, but we highly doubt that conversations about gender neutrality and inclusion will ever go away. Trans and nonbinary people have existed throughout human history, and cultures around the world have been trying to break apart the gender binary as we understand it in the United States for centuries.

And we don’t mean to be flippant—but what if you’re right and we’re wrong? What if these conversations really do end within the next decade? Well, if that turns out to be the case, that means that the very worst thing that has happened is that you have acted respectfully and made people in your life feel seen and affirmed in who they are today. And that seems like a worthwhile thing to do for others, don’t you think?

CONCLUSION

Let us reiterate it one more time: This is a lot of information.

If you've come to this guide as someone who already identifies as an ally, thank you for being here. We hoped you picked up a few new things. And if you've just begun your ally journey, hopefully we didn't overwhelm you with too many new ideas to absorb and explore. And if we did, hopefully we gave you the tools to begin that learning journey.

This is where we say goodbye.

But really, this isn't the end. This is just the beginning.

As you read this publication, there were probably a few places where you had questions or realized that you'll need to explore a few topics on your own. Hopefully there have been a couple of "ah-ha!" moments and advice that you'll take to heart and put into practice. No matter what, today was just the start for you.

As you consider your next steps, you can connect with PFLAG National and Straight for Equality online and engage with all the great information and resources that we share (contact information is at the end of this publication). You can also share this book with someone you know who is just starting out.

The important thing is to:

Keep learning.

Keep listening.

Keep talking.

And make sure that you're seen, and your voice is heard.

We hope to see you again on your road to active and engaged allyship.

ABOUT PFLAG

PFLAG is an organization of LGBTQ+ people, parents, families, and allies who work together to create an equitable and inclusive world. We are hundreds of thousands of people and hundreds of chapters from coast to coast who are leading with love to support families, educate allies, and advocate for just, equitable, and inclusive legislation and policies.

Since our founding in 1973, PFLAG works every day to ensure LGBTQ+ people everywhere are safe, celebrated, empowered and loved. Learn more, find support, donate, and take action at [PFLAG.org](https://www.pflag.org).

Our Mission. To create a caring, just, and affirming world for LGBTQ+ people and those who love them.

Our Vision. An equitable, inclusive world where every LGBTQ+ person is safe, celebrated, empowered, and loved.

Straight for Equality™ is a program of PFLAG National.

“Everyone should feel safe, loved, empowered and celebrated regardless of how they identify or who they love. I want to provide a safe and loving environment to all. Many struggle to find that comfort elsewhere and I take great pride in being that safe space.

I knew I was making a difference the day that a teen told me “I feel more comfortable at your house than I do at my own, because I can be myself here.”

—Annie

Guide to Being An Ally to Trans and Nonbinary People

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