

# Language

## Introduction

The power of language to shape our perceptions of other people is immense. Thoughtful use of terms in regards to sexuality and gender can have a significant impact on demystifying many misperceptions. Furthermore, many people refrain from talking about sexual orientation and gender identity because it feels taboo or they're afraid of saying the wrong thing. This glossary was written to help provide the words and meanings to facilitate conversation. This is a list of working definitions and should be a place to start. This vocabulary continues to evolve and there is not universal agreement about the definitions of many terms. The most important thing is that you respect how a person chooses to self-define or identify.

## Glossary

The power of language to shape our perceptions of other people is immense. Thoughtful use of terms in regards to sexuality and gender can have a significant impact on demystifying many misperceptions. Furthermore, many people refrain from talking about sexual orientation and gender identity because it feels taboo or they're afraid of saying the wrong thing. This glossary was written to help provide the words and meanings to facilitate conversation. This is a list of working definitions and should be a place to start. This vocabulary continues to evolve and there is not universal agreement about the definitions of many terms. The most important thing is that you respect how a person chooses to self-define or identify.

**Sexual Orientation:** the inclination to develop physical, romantic, emotional, and/or sexual relationships with people. Sexual orientation exists along a continuum that ranges from an exclusively gay or lesbian orientation to an exclusively heterosexual orientation and includes various forms of bisexuality. Sexual orientation is different from sexual behavior because it refers to feelings and self-concept. People may or may not express their sexual orientation in their behaviors.

**LGBT:** Years ago the prevailing acronym for the gay community was "LGB," which stands for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual. Over time, it grew to a more inclusive "LGBT," with the addition of Transgender. Soon, it expanded to "LGBTQ" and "LGBTQIA." There are still many variations of this acronym and the best way to understand this is to see what each letter represents. Longer acronyms are simply more inclusive and, at the same time, more specific. LGBTQQIAA includes the community of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual individuals as well as their Allies. Although all of the different identities within LGBT are often lumped together, there are specific needs and concerns related to each individual identity.

**Lesbian:** a woman whose enduring physical, romantic, emotional and/or sexual attraction is to other women. Some lesbians may prefer to identify as gay or as gay women.

**Gay:** the adjective used to describe people whose enduring physical, romantic, emotional and/or sexual attractions are to people of the same sex. It commonly refers to men, but can be used to refer to women. Lesbian is often a preferred term for women.

**Bisexual, Bi:** a person who is physically, romantically, emotionally and/or sexually attracted to men and women, not necessarily at the same time or to the same extent. Bisexual individuals need not have had

sexual experience with both men and women; in fact, they need not have had any sexual experience at all to identify as bisexual.

**Asexual:** a person who is not sexually attracted to others.

**Pansexual:** A person who is physical, romantically, emotionally, and/or sexually attracted to others regardless of their gender identity or biological sex. A pansexual could be open to someone identifies as male, female, transgender, intersex, or agendered/genderqueer.

**Heterosexual, Straight:** a person who is physically, romantically, emotionally and/or sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex.

**Coming Out:** the developmental process in which a person acknowledges, accepts, and appreciates his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. Coming out is a lifelong process, starting with coming out to oneself and then to others. Publicly identifying one's orientation may or may not be part of coming out.

**Openly Gay:** describes people who self-identify as lesbian or gay in their personal, public, and/or professional lives. Also *openly lesbian*, *openly bisexual*, and *openly transgender*.

**Closeted:** describes a person who is not open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. An individual may choose to remain closeted for a myriad of reasons, which might include fear of rejection, harassment, and anti-gay violence. A person may be closeted to some and out to others at the same time.

**Outing:** to declare the sexual orientation or gender identity of someone else (sometimes based on rumor and/or speculation) without that person's permission. Outing someone can have serious employment, economic, safety, or religious repercussions.

**Queer:** a term currently used by some people—particularly youth—to describe themselves and/or their community. Some value the term for its defiance, some like it because it can be inclusive of the entire community, and others find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities. Traditionally a negative or pejorative term for people who are gay, "queer" is disliked by many within the LGBT community, who find it offensive. Due to its varying meanings, this word should only be used when self-identifying or quoting someone who self-identifies as queer.

**Homophobia:** the fear and hatred of, or discomfort with people who love and are sexually attracted to members of the same sex. Prejudice is usually a more accurate description of hatred or antagonism towards LGBT people.

**Heterosexism:** the assumption that all people are or should be heterosexual. Heterosexism excludes the needs, concerns, and life experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people while it gives advantages to heterosexual people.

**Internalized heterosexism:** when a lesbian or gay individual accepts negative societal, cultural, religious, and familial attitudes and assumptions concerning LGB individuals. Internalized heterosexism is believed to be a developmental occurrence that all LGB individuals experience as a result of living in a heterosexist environment. Sometimes the term "internalized homophobia" is used instead.

**Heterosexual privilege:** the basic civil rights and social privileges that a heterosexual person automatically receives, which are denied to gay, lesbian or bisexual individuals based on their sexual orientation.

**Inclusive Language:** using language that does not specify a gender, sex, or sexual orientation unless it is pertinent to the comment. For example, using the inclusive terms “partner” or “significant other” instead of specifying “husband/wife/boyfriend/girlfriend.”

**Ally:** In the LGBT context, a person who supports and honors sexual and gender diversity; acts accordingly to challenge homophobic, heterosexist, and transphobic remarks and behaviors; and is willing to explore and understand these forms of bias within oneself.

**Biological/Anatomical Sex:** the physical structure of one’s reproductive organs that is used to assign sex at birth. Biological sex includes chromosomes; hormones; and internal and external genitalia. Given the potential variation in all of these, biological sex must be seen as a spectrum or range of possibilities rather than a binary set of two options (see “Intersex”).

**Gender Identity:** one’s innermost concept of self as male or female or both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One’s gender identity can be the same or different than the sex assigned at birth. Most people develop a gender identity that matches their biological self. For some, however, their gender identity is different from their biological or assigned sex. Some of these individuals choose to socially, hormonally and/or surgically change their physical appearance to more fully match their gender identity.

**Gender Expression:** refers to the ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, haircut, voice, and other forms of presentation.

**Gender Roles:** the set of roles, activities, expectations and behaviors assigned to females and males by society. Our culture recognizes two basic gender roles: masculine (having the qualities attributed to males) and feminine (having the qualities attributed to females).

**Transgender:** refers to an individual whose gender identity does not match their assigned sex at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may additionally identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.

**Genderqueer:** this term represents a blurring of the lines around gender identity and sexual orientation. Genderqueer individuals typically reject notions of static categories of gender and embrace a fluidity of gender identity and sexual orientation.

**Cisgender:** refers to people whose sex assignment at birth corresponds to their gender identity and expression.

**Intersex:** about 1% of children are born with chromosomes, hormones, genitalia and/or other sex characteristics that are not exclusively male or female as defined by the medical establishment in our society. In most cases, these children are at no medical risk, but most are assigned a biological sex (male or female) by their doctors and/or families.

**FtM (Female to Male):** an individual who was born anatomically female but has a male gender identity.

**MtF (Male to Female):** an individual who was born anatomically male but has a female gender identity.

**Transition:** the process by which a transgender individual strives to have their physical presentation align more closely with their identity. Transition can occur in three ways:

- 1) *Social transition* through non-permanent changes in clothing, hairstyle, name and or/pronouns
- 2) *Medical transition* through the use of medicines such as hormone “blockers” or cross hormones to promote gender-based body changes
- 3) *Surgical transition* in which an individual’s body is modified through the addition or removal of gender-related physical traits

**Transsexuals:** individuals who do not identify with their birth-assigned genders and physically alter their bodies surgically and/or hormonally. This physical transition is a complicated, multi-step process that may take years and may include, but is not limited to, sex reassignment surgery.

### **Offensive Terms to Avoid:**

**Offensive: homosexual**

**Preferred: gay or lesbian**

Please use "gay" or "lesbian" to describe people attracted to members of the same sex. Because of the clinical history of the word "homosexual," it is aggressively used by anti-gay extremists to suggest that gay people are somehow diseased or psychologically/emotionally disordered – notions discredited by the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association in the 1970s.

**Offensive: homosexual relations/relationship, homosexual couple, homosexual sex, gay marriage**

**Preferred: relationship, couple, sex, marriage**

Identifying a same-sex couple as "a homosexual couple," characterizing their relationship as "a homosexual relationship," or identifying their intimacy as "homosexual sex" is extremely offensive and should be avoided. These constructions are frequently used by anti-gay extremists to denigrate gay people, couples and relationships. As a rule, try to avoid labeling an activity, emotion or relationship "gay," "lesbian" or "bisexual" unless you would call the same activity, emotion or relationship "straight" if engaged in by someone of another orientation.

**Offensive: sexual preference**

**Preferred: sexual orientation or orientation**

The term “sexual preference” is typically used to suggest that being lesbian, gay or bisexual is a choice and therefore can and should be “cured.” *Sexual orientation* is the accurate description of an individual's enduring physical, romantic, emotional and/or sexual attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex and is inclusive of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and straight men and women.

**Offensive: gay lifestyle, homosexual lifestyle**

There is no single lesbian, gay or bisexual lifestyle. Lesbians, gay men and bisexuals are diverse in the ways they lead their lives. The phrase “gay lifestyle” is used to denigrate lesbians and gay men, suggesting that their orientation is a choice and therefore can and should be “cured.”

**Offensive: gay agenda, homosexual agenda**

**Preferred: Accurate descriptions of the issues (e.g., “ending the ban on openly gay service members”)**

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are motivated by many of the same hopes, concerns and desires as other everyday Americans. They seek to be able to earn a living, be safe in their communities, serve their country, and take care of the ones they love. Their commitment to equality is one they share with many allies and advocates who are not necessarily LGBT. Notions of a so-called "homosexual agenda" are rhetorical inventions of anti-gay extremists seeking to create a climate of fear by portraying the pursuit of equal opportunity for LGBT people as sinister.

**Offensive: “That’s so gay” as a pejorative term**

**Preferred:** Use “gay” to refer to people who self-identify as gay, or to refer to a place or thing related to gay culture (e.g. gay bar, Pride, rainbow flag). Don’t use the word “gay” pejoratively. For example, an assignment you don’t want to do is not “so gay,” someone’s new haircut is not “so gay,” a workout you hate is not “so gay,” a test you bombed is not “so gay,” and someone’s care is not “so gay.”

For a witty, heartfelt take on this topic, please watch Ash Beckham’s “That’s So Gay” speech at Ignite Boulder (about 5 minutes, available on YouTube).