

Terms, Definitions, and Labels

Terminology is important. The words we use, and how we use them, can be very powerful. Knowing and understanding the meaning of the words we use improves communication and helps prevent misunderstandings. The following terms are not absolutely-defined. Rather, they provide a starting point for conversations. As always, listening is the key to understanding.

Every thorough discussion about the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community starts with some very basic but often confusing terms, some of them may surprise you. Please do not hesitate to ask for clarification. This is a partial list of terms you may encounter. New language and terms emerge as our understanding of these topics changes and evolves.

A note about community abbreviations: Safe Zones has chosen to use the abbreviation LGBTQ²IA, for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex and Allies, to be as inclusive as possible. Sometimes the “G” is placed before the “L”; either order is acceptable. In the definitions below, shorter abbreviations (for example, LGBT, LGBTQ, etc.) may be used depending on the context.

Affectional (Romantic) Orientation: A recent term used to refer to variations in object of emotional and sexual attraction. The term is also used by those who consider themselves asexual to describe the gender(s) to which they are romantically attracted.

The term is preferred by some over “sexual orientation” because it indicates that the feelings and commitments involved are not solely (or even primarily, for some people) sexual. The term stresses the affective emotional component of attractions and relationships, regardless of orientation.

Ally: An individual whose attitudes and behavior are supportive and affirming of all genders and sexual orientations and who is active in combating homophobia, transphobia and heterosexism, both personally and institutionally.

Androgyny: Displaying physical and social characteristics identified in this culture as both female and male to the degree that the person’s outward appearance and mannerisms make it difficult to determine an androgynous person’s biological sex.

Asexual: A person who is not sexually attracted to either men or women and does not have a desire to engage in sexual activity with a partner. Asexuality is a sexual orientation and differs from celibacy, which is a choice to abstain from sex. Some asexual people have a desire to form intimate but nonsexual romantic relationships, and will date and seek long-term partnerships.

Assigned Sex: The sex that was recorded on a person’s birth certificate. A person’s assigned sex is generally determined by a cursory visual inspection of an infant’s external genitalia and may or may not be congruent with the person’s gender identity or with other biological markers of sex such as chromosomes and internal reproductive structures.

Bicurious: A term used to describe a person who identifies as heterosexual or homosexual but experiences some thoughts or visions about engaging in intimate relationships with a gender other than the one to which they are primarily attracted.

Biological Sex: The dichotomous distinction between female and male, based on physiological characteristics, especially chromosomes and external genitalia.

Biphobia/Binegativity: Aversion toward, discrimination against, or strong disapproval or hatred of bisexuals. Biphobia exists within the lesbian and gay community as well as general society.

Bisexual/Bi: A person who has sexual and emotional relationships with or feelings towards both women and men, although not necessarily at the same time

Butch: Generally, a person who expresses and/or presents culturally/stereotypically masculine characteristics. This term is also used to describe a specific lesbian identity (ie. Butch/Femme) Use the term with caution since in some contexts it can be perceived as offensive.

Camp: In LGBTQ circles, people (especially gay men) may be described as “camp” or “campy” if they behave in a manner that exaggerates gay mannerisms or stereotypes. Such exaggeration is often powerful in its ability to reveal the absurdity of gender expectations.

Cisgender: Not transgender, that is, having a gender identity or gender role that society considers appropriate for the sex one was assigned at birth. The prefix cis- is pronounced “sis”.

Closeted/In the Closet: The confining state of being secretive about one’s true gender identity and/or sexual orientation. A person may feel compelled to be closeted in order to keep a job, housing situation, family/friends, or for their safety. Many LGBTQ individuals are “out” in some situations and “closeted” in others.

Coming Out (Of the Closet) /Being Out: Refers to the process through which a person acknowledges, accepts, and learns to appreciate her or his lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identity. Sharing this information with others is not a single event but instead a life-long process.

Cross-dressing: Wearing clothing not usually associated with one’s birth sex. People may cross-dress for a variety of reasons including personal expression, sexual gratification, entertainment, or expressing ones’ gender identity.

Down Low (“DL”) – A term (“on the down low”) used to refer men who are in relationships with women, but who engage in clandestine sex with men. Typically, these men do not identify themselves as gay or bisexual. The term originated in the African-American community but the behavior is not unique to any race, ethnicity, or culture.

Drag: (also Drag King, Drag Queen, Female/Male Impersonator) - wearing the clothing of another gender, often with exaggerated cultural/stereotypical gender characteristics. Individuals may identify as Drag Kings (female in drag) or Drag Queens (male in drag). Drag often refers to

cross-dressing for purposes such as entertainment, performance or self expression. Drag holds a significant place in LGBTQ history and community.

Dyke: Once known as a derogatory term for lesbian, the term was reclaimed by lesbians in the 1970s. Today, many lesbians refer to themselves as dykes and proudly use the word. Because of its history as a pejorative term, non-lesbians should be cautious in using the term.

Effeminate: Used to identify a person (usually male) who expresses and/or presents culturally/stereotypically feminine characteristics. This is often viewed as a culturally negative term.

Faggot/Fag: A derogatory word frequently used to denote a gay male, origin uncertain.

Fag Hag: A term sometimes regarded as derogatory, used to describe women who prefer the social company of gay men.

Family: A term widely used by LGBTQ² persons to identify other LGBTQ² people.

Family of Orientation (Choice): Persons forming an individual's social, emotional, and practical support network and often fulfilling the functions of blood relations. Many LGBTQ people are rejected when their families learn of their sexual orientation or gender identity, or they may remain "closeted" to their biological relatives. In such cases, it is their partner/significant other and close friends who will be called on in time of illness or personal crisis.

Family of Origin: The biological family, or the family in which one was raised. These individuals may or may not be part of a person's support system.

Femme: Generally used to describe a person who expresses and/or presents culturally/stereotypically feminine characteristics. This term is also used to describe a specific lesbian identity (ie. butch/femme) Use the term with caution since in some contexts it can be perceived as offensive.

FTM/F2M: Abbreviation for Female-to-Male. A term that refers to male-identified people who were categorized as female at birth. (See also MTF and Transgender.)

Gay: Used to describe a man who is romantically, sexually, and/or affectionally attracted to men, although not all men who engage in sexual relations with other men identify themselves as "gay." The term is sometimes used to refer to the LGB community as a whole, although many women prefer to be identified as "lesbian" instead of "gay."

Gender: A term used to describe the social status of people as men, women, boys, girls, or variously transgendered, including characteristics of masculinity and femininity that are learned or chosen. A person's assigned sex does not always match their gender (see Transgender), and many people display traits of more than one gender. Gender is different from sexuality.

Gender Bending: Blurring the binary gender roles.

Gender Binary: Recognizes only two genders and regulates behavior within narrowly male or female expectations.. The idea is that all males should be male-identified and masculine, and all females should be female-identified and feminine.

Gender Dysphoria: An intense, continuous discomfort resulting from an individual's belief in the inappropriateness of their assigned sex at birth and resulting gender role expectations.

Gender Expression: The external presentation of a person's gender (e.g. dress, mannerisms, hair style, speech, etc.). One's gender expression may differ from one's gender identity.

Gender Identity: How an individual views himself or herself in terms of characteristics traditionally identified in this culture as male or female. A person may self-identify as purely male, purely female, or as possessing characteristics of both.

Gender Identity Disorder: A clinical, psychological diagnosis which is often required to receive surgical and/or hormonal sex reassignment. Many in transgender communities object to this requirement, viewing it as unnecessary and potentially stigmatizing.

Gender-neutral/Gender-free Pronouns: Pronouns which do not associate a gender with the person or creature being discussed. The English language has no truly gender-neutral third person pronoun available, and women especially have criticized this, as many writers use "he" when referring to a generic individual in the third person. In addition, the dichotomy of "he and she" in English does not leave room for other gender identities, a source of frustration to the transgender and gender-queer communities. People who are limited by languages which do not include gender neutral pronouns have attempted to create them, in the interest of greater equality. Some examples are "hir" for "him/her" and "zie" for "he/she".

Gender Normative/Gender Conforming: A person who conforms to gender-based societal expectations.

Gender Queer: A term that is growing in usage, representing a blurring of the lines surrounding society's rigid views of both gender identity and sexual orientation. Gender queer people embrace a fluidity of gender expression that is not limiting. They may not identify as male or female, but as both, neither or as a blend. Similarly, genderqueer is a more inclusive term with respect to sexual orientation.

Gender Roles: The socially constructed and culturally specific behavior and appearance expectations imposed on women (femininity) and men (masculinity).

Heterosexism/Heteronormativity A set of attitudes that is consistent with the belief that heterosexuality is a superior psychological, social and moral stance. This serves to create an invisibility or lack of validation and representation for people/relationships that are not heterosexual.

Heterosexuality: A sexual orientation in which a person feels physically and emotionally attracted to people of the "opposite" sex.

Heterosexual Privilege: The benefits and advantages heterosexuals receive in a heterosexist culture; for example, marriage. Also, the benefits lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people receive as a result of claiming or denying homosexual or bisexual identity.

Homonegativity: General disregard and dislike toward LGBTQ people.

Homophobia: Fear or hatred of those assumed to be LGBTQ and anything connected to their culture. It is a fear of homosexuality, either in other people or within themselves. This term represents a most extreme set of negative attitudes and beliefs and can include overt threats or expressions of hostility/violence. It occurs on personal, institutional, and societal levels.

Homosexual: A sexual orientation in which a person feels physically and emotionally attracted to people of the same sex. This “clinical” term originated in the 1800s and is not used within the gay and lesbian community.

Hormone Therapy/Hormonal Sex Reassignment: Administration of hormones to affect the development of secondary sex characteristics is a process, possibly lifelong, of using hormones to change the internal body chemistry. Androgens (testosterone) are used for female to males, and estrogens are used for male to females.

Internalized Homophobia: The fear and self-hate of one’s own homosexuality or bisexuality in individuals who have learned negative ideas about homosexuality throughout childhood. One form of internalized oppression is the acceptance of the myths and stereotypes applied to the oppressed group. It can result in depression, alienation, anxiety, and, in extreme cases, suicide.

Intersex: A person born with “sex chromosomes,” external genitalia, or an internal reproductive system that is not considered medically standard for either male or female. The gender identity and sexual orientation of these people varies as it does with non-intersex people. The older term “hermaphrodite” is considered to be offensive. Although intersexuality is relatively common, intersex infants often have their sex chosen for them shortly after birth. This is sometimes referred to as “assigned sex.” Assigning a sex to an intersex infant may involve surgical procedures to align the appearance of the genitals to the medical standard for either male or female. This practice has been criticized by many in the intersex community and remains a point of contention and controversy.

In the Closet: To be “in the closet” means to conceal one’s sexual orientation for fear of losing a job, a housing situation, relationships with family/friends/community, or in some other way to survive. Many LGBTQI individuals are “out” in some situations and “closeted” in others.

Kinsey Scale: The continuum model devised by Alfred Kinsey in 1948 that plotted sexuality from 0 to 6; 0 being exclusively heterosexual and 6 being exclusively homosexual. It was the first scale to account for bisexuality. According to a 1954 survey using the scale, 70% of people fell between 1 and 5. It’s been criticized for being too linear and only accounting for behavior and not sexual identity. (Note: The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid developed by Dr. Fritz Klein attempts to further measure various dimensions of sexual orientation by expanding on the Kinsey

Scale by incorporating sexual attraction, behavior, fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, lifestyle, and self-identification.)

Lesbian: Preferred term for a woman who is romantically, sexually, and/or affectionally attracted to women. The name is taken from the island of Lesbos where Sappho, the great women-loving poet of 600 BC lived. Many women who love women adopt this name with pride.

Lipstick Lesbian: A somewhat outmoded term to refer to lesbians who present a very feminine appearance (e.g., wearing makeup, dresses/skirts, etc.). It is sometimes used to refer to a lesbian who is seen as automatically passing for heterosexual.

MTF/M2F: Abbreviation for Male-to-Female. A term that refers to female-identified people who were categorized as male at birth.

Men who have Sex with Men (MSM): This term is often used when discussing sexual behavior and sexual health. It is inclusive of all men who participate in this behavior regardless of how they identify their sexual orientation. The abbreviation MSM is conventionally used in professional literature

Metrosexual: A term popularized in the 1990s referring to a heterosexual male who assumes characteristics traditionally associated with gay male stereotypes. While the term seems to imply a shift in sexual orientation it more accurately reflects a loosening of restrictions around male gender role adherence and is not related to sexuality.

Non-Op (also Non-Operative): A term to describe a transgendered person who does not plan to have sex reassignment surgery.

Outing: Publicly revealing the sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status of an individual who has chosen to keep that information private. Some activists, political groups, and media believe outing is justified and/or newsworthy when the person involved works against the interests of LGBTQI people. Others oppose it entirely as an invasion of privacy.

Partner or Significant Other: Primary domestic partner or spousal relationship(s). May also be referred to as *girlfriend/boyfriend, lover, roommate, life partner, wife/husband*, or other terms.

Pangender/Omnigender/Polygender: A person whose gender identity is comprised of all or many genders.

Pansexual/Omnisexual/Polysexual: A person who is sexually attracted to all or many genders or gender expressions.

Passing: Being taken for a member of the dominant group – white, straight, cisgender (non-transgender), for example, LGBTQ²I people who have the ability to *pass* can choose to conceal the stigma associated with being a member of a sexual minority.

Pink Triangle: An inverted triangle adopted by lesbian and gay culture starting in the 1970s in remembrance of homosexuals who were forced to wear pink triangles in Nazi concentration camps. Lesbians often wore the red and black triangles.

Pre-Op (also Pre-Operative): Transsexual individuals who have not undergone sex reassignment surgery, but who desire to and are seeking that as an option. They may or may not “cross-live” full-time and may or may not take hormone therapy. They may also seek surgery to change secondary sex characteristics.

Post-Op (also Post-Operative): Transsexual individuals who have undergone sex reassignment surgery, and/or other surgeries to change secondary-sex characteristics such as breasts, chest, Adam’s apple, or body contours.

Pride: A healthy self-respect, which, in the context of the gay community, promotes empowerment, education, safe living, and the sense that it is “okay to be gay.”

Pride March/Pride Parade: A public procession or parade of the LGBTQ²I community and their allies to proclaim pride, solidarity, and unity.

Queer: Historically a pejorative term for “gay”. The word “queer” has been reclaimed by some members of the community as a political act intended to undermine the violence that is embedded with the original use of the term. “Queer” is also sometimes used as an umbrella term for LGBTQ²I. It is still considered a slur by some people and in some contexts. This and other reclaimed terms can be offensive to the in-group when used by the out-group, so such terms should be used with caution.

Questioning: A process whereby an individual is re-assessing his or her sexual orientation and/or gender identity. A person who is “questioning” may be unsure of their sexual identity or still exploring their feelings.

Rainbow Flag: Designed in 1978 in San Francisco by artist Gilbert Baker signifying the diversity and unity of the LGBTQ²IA movement. Originally, there were eight colors in the flag; pink for sexuality, red for light, orange for healing, yellow for the sun, green for natural serenity, turquoise for art, indigo for harmony, and violet for spirit. In 1979, the flag was modified to its current six-stripe format (pink was omitted; blue substituted for turquoise and indigo, and violet became rich purple).

Same Gender Loving (SGL): A term used often by gay and lesbian African-Americans as an alternative to ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian.’ It helps provide an identity not marginalized by racism within the gay community or heterosexism in society.

Sex: The biological (anatomical, hormonal, or genetic) traits used to categorize someone as either male or female.

Sexism: The societal/cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that privilege men, subordinate women, and denigrate women-identified values.

Sexuality: “Who you like and what you do.” Sexuality is distinct from gender identity and sex. Generally speaking, human sexuality is how people experience and express themselves as sexual beings and encompasses an array of social activities and an abundance of behaviors.

Sexual Identity: Sexual identity is identifying, claiming, and owning a part of the self, associated with one’s gender identity, sexual orientation, or sexuality. Sexual identity may mean identifying as a member of the LGBTQ²I community.

Sexual Minority: A group whose sexual identify, orientation or practices differ from the dominant group in the surrounding society.

Sexual Orientation: A person’s emotional, physical, and sexual attraction and the expression of that attraction with other individuals. The term “sexual orientation” is preferred over “sexual preference.” The latter term implies a choice and sexual attraction is not generally considered a choice.

Sexual Preference: A misleading term that conveys the idea that sexual orientation is always a choice. “Sexual orientation” is used more often and more accurate. Avoid using this term.

Sex Reassignment Surgery: Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) is permanent surgical body modification that seeks to attain congruence between one’s body and one’s gender identity. For example: chest reconstruction or genital reconstruction. (Sometimes known as Gender Reassignment Surgery).

Straight: A term originating in the gay community to describe heterosexuals.

Straight-Acting: A term, usually applied to gay men, who readily pass as heterosexual. The term implies that there is a stereotypical way gay men act that is significantly different from heterosexual men.

Stonewall: The site of several nights of violent protests following a police raid at the Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969 in New York City. The Stonewall Inn was raided for no other reason than it was a drag bar. Although not the nation’s first gay-rights demonstration, Stonewall is regarded as the birth of the modern LGBTQ movement.

Tranny: Usually a pejorative term used for a transgender person, although some transgender people have reclaimed the term.

Transition: The process of a transgender individual changing his or her gender presentation in society. Transitioning often includes changes in name, clothing and appearance and may include anatomical changes. **Transitioning** is sometimes confused with sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) which is only one element of transitioning. Many people who transition choose not to have SRS. Whereas SRS is a surgical procedure, transitioning is more holistic and can encompass physical, psychological, social, legal, and emotional changes. Some genderqueer and

intersex people have little or no desire to undergo surgery to change their body but will transition in other ways.

Transgender/Trans: A term for people who challenge society's view of gender as fixed, unmovable, dichotomous, and inextricably linked to one's biological sex. Gender is more accurately viewed as a spectrum, rather than a polarized, dichotomous construct. This is a broad term that encompasses cross-dressers, intersexed people, gender benders, transsexuals and those who defy what society tells them is appropriate for their gender. The sexual orientation of transgender persons varies just as it varies across society.

Transman/Transmasculine: Identity label preferred by some female-to-male transgender people.

Transphobia/Transnegativity: Aversion, strong disapproval, hatred and/or discrimination against people who break or blur gender roles and sex characteristics. Like biphobia, it is prevalent in both straight and gay/lesbian communities.

Transsexual: Individuals whose assigned sex at birth does not match their gender identity and who, through sex reassignment surgery and hormone treatments may seek to change their physical body to match their gender identity. Transsexual individuals' sexual orientation can be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or anywhere on the continuum.

Transwoman/Transfeminine: Identity label preferred by some male-to-female transgender people.

Transvestite: Generally a derogatory term to refer to a person who dresses in clothes traditionally associated with persons of a different gender. "Cross-dresser" is the preferred term.

Two-Spirit/Twin Spirit: Native American concept present in some indigenous cultures across North America and parts of Central and South America. It is a term of reverence, traditionally referring to people who display both masculine and feminine sex or gender characteristics, as well as manly hearted women who have lived a het life and produced children and after the death of her husband take female-lovers and are accepted by the community in that role. Named "berdache" by European colonists, those who are Two-Spirited are and were traditionally respected and may be healers or leaders thought to possess a high spiritual development.

Ze (pronounced "sea")/Hir (pronounced "here"): Two examples of alternate gender-neutral pronouns in lieu of "he/she" or "his/her".

(Source: Safe Zones manuals from various programs, Martin Doucett, Ph.D., Carrie Sakai, Psy.D., Elle Van Dermark, MA, and Shewit Tekle.)