

# Understanding sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression

You've probably seen the acronym LGBTQ or even LGBTQ+. Maybe you've heard terms like "transgender," "trans," or "queer." But you might be confused about what all these terms mean.

How we see ourselves is important. Being human doesn't fit easily into certain boxes. And the words we use to describe ourselves matter.

Knowing these terms can help you better understand others and what it means to be who you really are.

## Terms related to sexual orientation

**Sexual orientation:** This term describes a person's romantic, sexual, emotional and relational attraction to another person (this can include same-sex, opposite-sex or both).

**Heterosexual or "straight":** These terms refer to a person who has sexual and romantic feelings primarily for people of the opposite sex.

**Homosexual or "gay":** These terms refer to a person who has sexual and romantic feelings primarily for people of the same sex.

**Lesbian:** A gay woman.

**Bisexual or "bi":** This term refers to men and women who have sexual and romantic feelings for people of both sexes.

**Pansexual:** This term refers to someone whose sexual and romantic feelings are not limited by the other person's gender identity and expression. Not everyone agrees about how or whether this term differs from "bisexual."

**Queer:** This is an inclusive term for all people who are not heterosexual. In the past, this term was often used as an insult. A younger generation of LGBTQ+ people have embraced the term and reclaimed it in a positive way.

**Questioning:** Refers to a person who is in the process of exploring his or her sexual orientation.

**LGBTQ+:** All-inclusive acronym — Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (or Questioning). The plus sign refers to pansexual, asexual and other orientations and identities that differ from what's considered heterosexual and cisgender (we'll explain cisgender below).

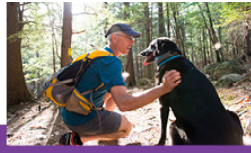
**Heterosexism:** This is the assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual.

**Homophobia:** A fear, hatred and/or distrust of gay people, homosexuality or any behavior that doesn't conform to heterosexist standards.

**Internalized homophobia:** This refers to LGBTQ+ individuals disliking or resenting their own sexual orientation or gender identity due to negative stereotypes.

This material provides a general overview of the topic. Health information is not a substitute for diagnosis or treatment by a therapist, physician or other health care professional. Contact a health care professional with any questions or concerns about specific health care needs.

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**In the closet:** Describes a person who hides and/or denies his or her sexual orientation. Many LGBTQ+ people feel forced to pretend to be straight in order to survive and/or keep a job, relationship, housing, status, etc.

**Coming out:** The process LGBTQ+ people go through in which they accept, acknowledge and appreciate their sexual orientation or gender identity and publicly declare it to others.

## Terms related to gender identity

**Birth assigned gender/sex:** A person's biological sex at birth.

**Sex:** Refers to the anatomy and biology that determines whether a person is male, female or intersexed.

**Intersexed:** Having biological traits that don't fit typical male or female definitions. This was once called "hermaphroditic".

**Gender identity:** A person's internal sense of being either male, female or something other or in between. A person's gender identity may not match physical sexual characteristics. Gender identity and sexual orientation are separate from each other.

**Gender expression:** Behaviors and appearances (e. g. hair, clothing, voice, body language) by which people show their gender identity or gender choices.

**Gender role:** The social and cultural expectations around behavior and appearance based on someone's biological sex. Gender roles change over time. For example, people now reject the "old-fashioned" notions that women should stay at home and only men can be scientists or doctors.

**Cisgender:** A term for people whose gender identity matches their physical sex at birth. This is sometimes referred to as "cis," pronounced "siz."

**Transgender:** This is a term for people whose gender identity does not match the physical sex they were assigned at birth. As an umbrella term, transgender includes someone born a male or female who identifies as:

- The opposite gender
- Neither male nor female (agender),
- Both male and female (bigender or genderfluid) or
- An unconventional gender (such as genderqueer or pangender).

"Transgender" is an adjective, not a noun. So you would say someone is a "transgender person" instead of "a transgender."

**Transsexual:** This term is now considered out of date. It used to refer to a transgender person who wanted to use hormones or surgery to change his or her physical sexual traits. Most transsexual people refer to themselves as transgendered.

**Cross-dresser:** This term refers to people who dress and act in the style of the gender opposite to the one with which they were born. Dressing in "drag" is historically based on cross-dressing. "Transvestites" and "transvestitism" are old-fashioned terms for cross-dressing. It is considered unacceptable to use those terms now.

**Female-to-male (FTM):** People who are born with female bodies, but have predominantly male gender identity.

**Male-to-female (MTF):** People who are born with male bodies, but have predominant female gender identity.

**Transphobia:** The fear and hatred of, or discomfort with, people whose gender identity or gender expression differs from cultural gender norms.