

LGBT Definitions

Terms are organized as a teaching tool, rather than being in alphabetical order.

LGBTQI:

Acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and intersex.

- The letter “A” may be added, and may refer to asexual or ally.
- “LGBT” is the abbreviated and more commonly used acronym.

Sexual Orientation:

One’s attraction or affection (physical, emotional, romantic) for another person, defined by the gender of that person.

- Sexual orientations are heterosexual, homosexual (gay/lesbian), bisexual, and asexual.
- Some individuals are very young when they become aware of their sexual orientation. However, awareness can arise at any time in lifecycle.
- Just as being right-handed, left-handed or ambidextrous, sexual orientation is not a choice. It has yet to be discovered precisely what determines sexual orientation.

Heterosexual:

Someone who is primarily physically and emotionally attracted to people of the opposite sex.

Straight:

A synonym for heterosexual.

Homosexual:

Someone who is primarily physically and emotionally attracted to people of the same sex.

- Because the term is associated historically with a medical model of care and the term homosexual has often been used in derogatory, marginalizing and hurtful ways, most homosexual people encourage the use of the terms lesbian or gay.

Gay:

A synonym for homosexual. This term can refer to both males and females (e.g. the gay community), but is increasingly used to refer to men only.

- Some gay men have reclaimed terms that have long been considered derogatory (such as faggot, fag, homo, pansy, and fruit) and now use them proudly.

Lesbian:

A female who is physically and emotionally attracted to other females.

- The term lesbian is derived from Lesbos, a Greek Island that was home to Sappho, a poet and teacher who loved other women.
- Some women have reclaimed terms that have long been considered derogatory (such as dyke, butch, and lezzie) and now use them proudly.

MSM / WSW: (men who have sex with men / women who have sex with women)

Someone who has sex with a person of the same gender.

- This terminology relates specifically to sexual behavior, which may not always be congruent with sexual orientation or identity. This person may identify as gay, bisexual or heterosexual.

Bisexual:

An individual who experiences the capacity for feeling romantic affection and/or sexual attraction to members of all sexes/genders. In other words, attracted to persons regardless of gender.

- Bisexual individuals are not necessarily attracted equally to both men and women, and are not always attracted to both men and women at the same time.
- Bisexuality is often thought of as a “phase” on the way to coming out as gay or lesbian. However, for many people, being bisexual is a life-long sexual identity.
- Not all people are comfortable with this term because sexual identity is fluid and more varied than this term presumes.
- Bisexuals may encounter discrimination by heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men.

Asexual:

A word describing someone who is not sexually attracted and/or romantically active with other persons.

Gender Identity:

A person’s deep sense of being male, female, neither or both; how we think about and express our gender.

- Gender identity most often corresponds with one’s birth gender, but sometimes a person’s gender identity doesn’t directly correspond to their birth anatomy.
- Gender identity, sexual orientation and sexual behavior are not necessarily congruent. For example, not everyone acts on his or her attractions; one can know his/her sexual orientation without ever having had sex.

Gender Role:

Characteristics attached to culturally defined notions of femininity and masculinity, and the public expression of these characteristics.

Transgender(ed) / Trans / Transperson:

One whose gender identity or expression differs from his or her birth gender, regardless of the status of surgical and/or hormonal gender reassignment processes.

- These terms are often used as “umbrella” terms to refer to anyone who crosses gender roles in one way or another. This can include transsexuals, drag queens / kings, cross-dressers, intersex individuals, two-spirit persons, etc. (Also synonymous with “trans community” or “trans population.”)
- Transgender people may choose not to alter their bodies by means of hormones and/or surgery, focusing instead on expanding their gender identity mentally and expressing their gender role through nonbinary (“third gender/third sex” or androgyny) behavior.
- Some transgender people choose to use hormones without sex reassignment surgery and may identify as “transgenderists.”
- A transwoman should be referred to as “she” and a transman as “he.”
- Some transpeople prefer not to be “out” as trans, but rather just blend in as male or female. A transperson’s ability to be accepted as their preferred gender is called “passing”.
- Transpeople may identify as gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual or otherwise.

Cross Dresser:

One who wears clothing associated with the opposite gender, often for recreation or erotic enjoyment.

- This term has replaced the term “transvestite.”
- Cross dressers may be male or female, and can be straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Drag Queen, Drag King:

- One who dresses up in clothing of the opposite gender for fun and entertainment. A male cross-dresser is called a “Drag Queen,” and female is called a “Drag King.”
- Though drag is often associated with gay or trans communities, assumptions should not be made as to the person’s sexual orientation or gender identity.

Two-Spirit:

A term coined within queer aboriginal populations to describe a person’s spiritual nature as being comprised of both male and female spirits.

- Traditionally, two-spirit people often had elevated status as spiritual healers (shamans) in their communities.

Intersex:

A person who has some mixture of male and female genetic and/or physical sex characteristics.

- This term has replaced the term “hermaphrodite.”
- Intersex children have often been subjected to surgery and assignment to male or female gender based on medical opinion.
- Many intersex people consider themselves members of the trans community.

Queer:

An umbrella term that encompasses a broad range of sexual and gender identities, behaviors and expressions.

- Previously a derogatory term, this word has been reclaimed and is used proudly by many LGBT people.
- “Queer” can also express political and cultural statements and attitudes.

GenderQueer:

A recent term coined by young people who experience a very fluid sense of both their gender identity and their sexual orientation. They prefer to be open to relocate themselves on the gender and sexual continuums.

Questioning:

People who are questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation.

- These individuals may choose to explore options in terms of gender and sexual orientation and presentation.
- In some cases, individuals who are “questioning” may experience confusion and/or conflict.

Homophobia / Biphobia / Transphobia:

Irrational fear, dislike or hatred of homosexuals / bisexuals/ transpeople, often exhibited as prejudice, discrimination, jokes, name-calling, exclusion, harassment, and acts of violence (known as “bashing” or “bullying”).

- LGBT people, especially those who have experienced a lot of homophobia in their lives, may internalize feelings of fear or shame, and suffer low self-worth or self-hatred. This is called “internalized homophobia.”
- Some heterosexuals may suffer discrimination because they do not necessarily fit in with socially accepted gender roles – for example, a boy who is called gay because he enjoys dancing.

Heterosexism:

The pervasive assumption (expressed overtly and/or covertly) that everyone is, or should be, heterosexual and that heterosexuality is the only normal, natural sexual orientation.

- Heterosexism excludes the needs, concerns, and life experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people, while giving advantages to heterosexual people. It is a subtle form of oppression that reinforces silence and invisibility for lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

Heterosexual Privilege:

The unrecognized and assumed privileges that people have if they are heterosexual.

- Examples: Holding hands or kissing in public without fearing threat; not questioning the normalcy of one's sexual orientation; raising children without fear that they will experience discrimination because of their parents' sexual orientation.

Coming Out:

1. The developmental process through which LGBT people recognize their sexual orientation / gender identity and integrate this knowledge into their personal and social lives.
2. Disclosure of one's sexual orientation or gender identity to others. For example, "I just came out to my parents." "Coming out" is not a single event. In every new social situation and with every new acquaintance, a decision must be made about whether or not to disclose one's sexual orientation / gender identity. An LGBT person may never be "out of the closet" in all parts of life.

Ally:

A person who is not a member of a specific group, but who supports that group, challenges discrimination and oppression of that group, and explores his or her own biases.