



## Terms Commonly Associated with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and Questioning Communities

**Language is dynamic and value-laden; it grows, changes, develops and has impact on lives and experiences.** This is particularly true with the language of diversity and the terms (labels) we use to identify ourselves and others. Therefore, as respectful individuals and dutiful professionals, we should strive to be sure that our language is accurate and inclusive, that it does not demean, exclude or offend. So while these definitions provide a *starting* point for understanding and discussion, we must allow others to self-identify and -define, recognizing that a complexity of terms is needed to reflect the complex diversity of people.

**LGBTIQ+:** One acronym used to briefly describe the diverse communities outside the social dominant norms of heterosexuality and sex/gender-conformity. Made up of the first letter of “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Questioning/Queer.” These letters may be seen in different orders (example: GLBTQ, BGLTQ, etc.), and/or include additional letters for additional identities, for example A for Ally. The plus is sometimes included to recognize those who aren’t otherwise represented in the acronym.

### **QUEER:**

*NOTE: Some in the LGBT communities feel the word has been hatefully used against them for too long, and so are reluctant to embrace it. Levels of use and acceptability vary by generation, region and individual.*

- 1) An umbrella term used by some to refer to all LGBTI people, as more inclusive and/or succinct than any acronym.
- 2) A political statement that advocates breaking binary thinking and seeing both sexual orientation and gender identity as potentially fluid. An individual may relate more to its use in terms of sexual orientation (sexual fluidity), sex/gender (genderqueer) or political orientation (critically questioning dominant ways of thinking about a variety of issues, including sexuality and gender).
- 3) A label to explain a complex set of identities, behaviors and desires. For example, a person who is attracted to multiple genders, or a heterosexual man who does not fit society’s narrow view of acceptable masculinity.

**GENDER IDENTITY:** The gender that a person sees themselves as: ex. As a woman, as a man, as a transgender/gender queer person, as a combination, or as none of these categories. A person’s gender identity may or may not conform to the conventional expectations for their birth sex. For example, a person may be assigned male at birth and identify as a woman.

**GENDER EXPRESSION/PRESENTATION:** Addresses how individuals externally communicate their gender identity through clothing, behavior, mannerisms, hairstyle, speech, grooming, etc. A person’s gender expression may differ from their gender identity and/or their sex. Gender expression may also include appearance, mannerisms, and other gendered characteristics. Sometimes, transgender people seek to match their physical expression with their gender identity, rather than their birth-assigned sex. Gender expression refers only to gender identity and is not related to sexual orientation.

**SEX (OR ASSIGNED SEX):** A typically binary system (male/female) set by the mainstream medical system that is assigned to people at birth based on physical traits such as genitalia, hormones, chromosomes and secondary sex characteristics. A person’s assigned sex may or may not fit into this binary system (see Intersex) or match with their gender identity.

*Sex, gender identity and gender expression/presentation do NOT indicate a person’s sexual orientation.*

**Gender Fluidity:** Gender describes the flexible range of gender expression. Gender fluid individuals are not confined by boundaries of stereotypical expectations of girls or boys. An individual may feel they are a “girl” some days and a “boy” on others. They may also feel that neither term describes them accurately, otherwise known as gender neutral.

**Gender Identity:** An individual’s inner concept of self, how individuals perceive themselves, and what they call themselves. Gender identity may align or be different than the sex assigned at birth. Individuals begin their self-discovery as early as 18 months. The majority of people identify with a gender identity that matches their biological sex. For some, however, their gender identity is different from their biological or assigned sex.

**Gender Roles:** This is binary set of roles, expectations and behaviors assigned to females and males by a society. Western culture often recognizes two basic gender roles: Masculine and feminine. These groups are often stereotyped and boxed in. There are some who step out of their socially assigned gender roles, or a gender variant, transgender or gender neutral. Other cultures have three or more gender roles.

**Bi-Gender:** One who has a significant gender identity that encompasses both primary genders. Some may feel that one side or the other is stronger, but both sides are there.

**Binary gender:** The classification of sex and gender into two distinct, opposite and disconnected forms of masculine and feminine. In this model “sex”, “gender” and “sexuality” are assumed to align.

**Cisgender/Gender Normative:** Refers to people whose sex assignment at birth corresponds to their gender identity and expression. An individual who is not transgender/transsexual. Someone who is gender/sex-conforming.

**Gender-specific pronoun** is a pronoun associated with a particular grammatical gender, such as masculine, feminine, or neuter, such as female or male. Examples include the English third-person personal pronouns *he* and *she*.

**Gender-neutral pronoun**, by contrast, is a pronoun that is not associated with a particular grammatical or social gender and that does not imply, for instance, male or female. Many English pronouns are gender-neutral, including *they*. Some other commonly used substitutes for they, she and he are: Ze, Sie, Ve, Co and Hir.

**Intersex:** A condition describing a person whose reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormones and/or secondary sex characteristics don't seem to fit the typical definition of male or female, or which combine features of the male and female sexes. Arbitrary medical guidelines have often decided whether intersex babies will be assigned male or female sex (usually what's easier to “fix” anatomically); and can create problems if/as the child's gender identity develops not in keeping with the assigned sex.

**Transgender:** An *umbrella* term for individuals whose gender identity is not accurately or adequately described by the sex they were assigned at birth. This term includes individuals who live in accordance with their gender identity even when this does not match their assigned sex. It can apply to a spectrum of gender identities and expressions and includes transsexuals, cross dressers, genderqueer, and gender variant people. *Not* a sexual orientation.

Some terms commonly related to transgender communities:

- **FTM (female to male):** Person born female who identifies as male. Many also use the term “trans-man.”
- **MTF (male to female):** Person born male who identifies as female. Many also use the term “trans-woman.”
- **Transsexual:** A person who lives as a sex other than the one they were assigned at birth. Transsexuals may or may not desire to alter their bodies through hormonal therapy, sex reassignment surgeries or other means. Distinct from cross-dressers and drag kings/queens, whose non-conformity is usually temporary (not constant), and for different purposes.
- **Transition:** The process when a person begins living as the gender with which they identify rather than the gender they were assigned at birth. During this time, individuals change their body (sex) and gender presentation/expression to align with their gender identity. This may include a name change, pronoun change, and hormonal and/or surgical modifications. Transition is an individual process that can include any, all, or none of these changes. An individual may be transitioning currently, or be pre-, post-, or non-transition.

**Sexism:** The belief in the inherent superiority of one sex or gender, and thereby its right to dominance. Most modern societies are patriarchal, meaning that men are considered superior to women and transgender people, and are given unearned advantages.

**Transitioning:** The time when a person begins to living as the gender with which they identify rather than the gender they were assigned at birth, which often includes changing one's name and dressing and grooming differently. Transitioning may or may not also include medical and legal aspects, including taking hormones, having surgery, or changing identity documents (e.g. driver's license, Social Security record) to reflect one's gender identity. Not all trans people transition; choice, finances and legal issues may also affect whether and to what degree individuals transition.

**Two Spirit:** An English-language term for a family of identities/ concepts present in some Native American cultures that an individual can express or exist in both masculine and feminine realms, drawing on both the material and spiritual realms.

**SEXUAL ORIENTATION:** an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual, spiritual, affectional, and/or relational attraction to another person or persons. It can involve fantasy, behavior, and self-identification; a person's general makeup or alignment in terms of partner attraction. Sexual orientation evolves through a multistage developmental process, and may change over time. One's sexual orientation is not necessarily associated with a person's gender identity; and the two can be completely unrelated. Self-labels might include the terms below, and/or others, and may change over time or by setting.

**Ace:** which is sometimes spelled “ase,” short for “asexual.”

**Ace-spectrum:** Describes identities that are on the asexual spectrum, but do not entirely identify as asexual. Gray-asexuality and demisexuality are grouped under this term.

**Androgynoromantic:** Romantic attraction to androgyny, regardless of one’s gender.

**Aromantic:** A lack of romantic attraction.

**Asexual:** A sexual orientation that is characterized by a lack of sexual attraction.

**Bisexual:** (also “bi”) A person whose emotional, romantic, sexual, spiritual affectional, and/or relational attraction is to men *and* women, or to many genders (aka pan-/omnisexual). Degree of attraction and choice of primary relationship partner(s) varies for each bisexual person.

**Demisexual:** “A sexual orientation where the individual only experiences sexual attraction after forming a strong, emotional bond (platonic or romantic). Demisexuality is considered to be a subset of gray-asexuality.” Stormy O’Brink

**Gay:** Someone who is male-identified whose primary emotional, romantic, sexual, spiritual affectional, and/or relational attraction is to other people who are male-identified. Sometimes used colloquially as an umbrella term to include gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, and even transgender people although many view this as essentializing and problematic.

**Gray-Asexual:** (also referred to as “gray-a”) “A sexual orientation in which the person does not normally experience sexual attraction, but may experience it sometimes under rare or specific circumstances. The person may also feel sexual attraction, but have no desire to act on it.” Stormy O’Brink

**Lesbian:** Someone who is female-identified whose primary emotional, romantic, sexual, spiritual affectional, and/or relational attraction is to other people who are female-identified.

**Heterosexual:** An individual whose primary emotional, romantic, sexual, spiritual, affectional, and/or relational attraction is to people of a gender different from their own. Heterosexual people are also referred to as “straight.”

**Homosexual:** Attracted to members of the same sex/gender. Originally a medical diagnosis, a clinical and technical term that is no longer generally used by lesbians and gay men or their communities.

**Straight:** Someone who is attracted to people of the opposite binary gender; a synonym for heterosexual.

**Pansexual:** An individual who is attracted to all gender identities and expressions. More rarely, **omnisexual**.

**Polyamory:** A consensual, nonexclusive romantic relationship with two or more individuals.

**Questioning:** A person who is struggling to understand and/or accept their sexual orientation, gender identity/expression (or other identities).

**Queerplatonic Relationship:** A relationship that is not quite romantic, but involves an intense emotional connection beyond what most people would consider a normal friendship. The term comes from the idea of “queering” relationships or redefining relationships and perceptions about them. Though the term is primarily used in the asexual and aromantic community, anyone of any orientation can have a queerplatonic partner.

## GENERAL TERMS

**Ally:** Label earned (not claimed) when a member of a dominant group recognizes social inequalities privileging their own group and oppressing others, and takes action to confront unjust words, behaviors, attitudes, policies, practices and systems in themselves and others. Typically used for a heterosexual person advocating for LGB persons, or a cisgender person (of any orientation) fighting alongside the trans-communities; but applicable more widely.

**Being “Out” or Out of the Closet:** A term which means being open and public about being lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex, transgender, or queer. Some people are “out” in some settings (for example, with friends) and not “out” in other settings (for

example, at work, with family, or in religious communities). Movements for coming out (i.e., “Out of the closets and into the streets”) were mostly spearheaded by white, middle to upper class gay men and lesbians who had the privilege and social capital to do so. Being out is not an option for everyone (see “Coming Out”).

**Down-low (the DL):** Term avowed by and ascribed to men (media coverage has focused on African American men, but it applies to all races/ethnicities) who engage in romantic or sexual relations with other men while also living heterosexual lives. Men on the down-low may have a variety of reasons for being so, and may or may not be in relationships with women.

**Family, or Family of Origin, or Family of Choice:** “Two or more persons who share resources, share responsibility for decisions, share values and goals, and have commitments to one another over a period of time. The family is the climate that one comes home to; and it is the network of sharing and commitments that most accurately describes the family unit, regardless of blood, or adoption, or marriage.” (American Home Economics Association)

In addition, “Family” is often a term used by LGBTQ individuals to describe their close circle of support since many have been abandoned or ostracized by their natural/biological family.

**In the Life:** Similar to “Same Gender Loving,” this term is used within some communities of color, most frequently in the African American community, this term refers to someone who experiences affectional, emotional, sexual, and/or spiritual attraction to people of the same gender.

**Outing:** When another person’s sexuality or gender identity becomes known to an individual or group often without their consent or approval. This is different than coming out. “Outing” someone can have significant negative consequences for an LGBTIQ+ or HIV positive individual, such as jeopardizing employment, housing, health insurance, relationships, child custody and personal safety.

**Same Gender Loving:** Used within some communities of color, most frequently in the African American community, to describe someone who experiences affectional, emotional, sexual, and/or spiritual attraction to people of the same gender.

**Sex-positive:** “The philosophy that all consensual sexual activities are fundamentally healthy and pleasurable, and encourages sexual pleasure and experimentation.” Stormy O’Brink

**Sex-Repulsed:** “An adjective used to describe one’s extreme distaste or disgust with sex or things related to it.” Stormy O’Brink

## HISTORY

**Pink Triangle:** A symbol gay pride, reclaimed from its use in Nazi concentration camps to designate homosexual men (similar to yellow stars for Jews). Variations include Black Triangles (lesbian), and surrounded by green circles as sign of support (as in many Safezone program emblems).

**Rainbow Flag:** Artist Gilbert Baker first proposed the Rainbow Flag as the symbol for the 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade. Volunteers hand-dyed and hand-stitched two huge flags out of organically grown cotton. The original design used eight colors, but hot pink and turquoise were eliminated because of cost. The six colors of the resulting flag displayed at the 1979 parade symbolized the following: red for life, orange for healing, yellow for sun, green for harmony with nature, blue for art, and purple for spirit. The Rainbow Flag became nationally known after a 1988 lawsuit in which John Stout, a gay man living in West Hollywood, CA. successfully fought his landlord’s attempt to keep him from flying the flag from his apartment balcony. A mile-long rainbow flag weighing over 7,000 pounds was carried by over 10,000 people as part of the 1994 New York City Pride Parade, marking the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising.

Original material and adapted from: the University of Illinois Springfield’s *Safe Zone Definitions: Terms Commonly Associated with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Communities* ([www.uis.edu/studentaffairs/safezone/resources/definitions.html](http://www.uis.edu/studentaffairs/safezone/resources/definitions.html)), Colorado Anti-Violence Program ([coavp.org](http://coavp.org) guides), Matthew’s Place ([www.matthewsplace.com/voice/asexual-and-aromantic-vocabulary](http://www.matthewsplace.com/voice/asexual-and-aromantic-vocabulary)), Gender Spectrum ([www.genderspectrum.org/quick-links/understanding-gender](http://www.genderspectrum.org/quick-links/understanding-gender)), It’s Pronounced Metrosexual ([itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2013/01/a-comprehensive-list-of-lgbtq-term-definitions](http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2013/01/a-comprehensive-list-of-lgbtq-term-definitions)), Trans Equality ([www.transequality.org/issues/resources/transgender-terminology](http://www.transequality.org/issues/resources/transgender-terminology)), and Transadvocate ([www.transadvocate.com/glossary](http://www.transadvocate.com/glossary))