

TRANSGENDER 101: A QUICK GUIDE ON BEING AN ALLY TO PEOPLE WHO ARE TRANSGENDER AND GENDER NON-CONFORMING

Transgender Identities

“Transgender” and “gender non-conforming people” refer to people who transcend gendered social roles assigned at birth based on their anatomical sex. The term transgender is used broadly to refer to countless identities and gender expressions, including but not limited to: male-to female (MTF), female-to-male (FTM), genderqueer, trans, transsexual, cross dresser, boi, butch, queen, etc. The term gender non-conforming is used to refer to individuals who transgress gender in various ways, but who may not identify as transgender. Identity in this context is really about self-determination; about letting the world know how you identify instead of being classified by constructed gender norms. People come from different backgrounds and experience the world in different ways and as a result may attach entirely different meanings to what it means to be transgender or any of the other identities listed above. There is not one trans narrative, just as there is not one human narrative.

Self-Determination

Self-determination refers to the right of individuals and communities to have full power over our own lives. We live under complex legal, medical, social and state systems that restrict gender expression and privilege some genders over others. Gender self-determination necessarily includes access to and control over healthcare, holistic mental and emotional support, fashion and self-expression, gender-affirming housing, education, bathrooms, and social services, freedom from violence, harassment, and incarceration, and all the tools we need to be fabulous, empowered and safe in how we live in our genders. Gender self-determination means having control over our own gender identities, free from limitation. Some aspects of one’s self identification include:

Pronouns

Pronouns are words used to refer to someone in the third person and, in the English language, pronouns often indicate someone’s gender identity. Common pronouns are “he” and “she.” If you are not sure what someone’s preferred pronoun is, simply ask, “What pronoun do you prefer?” If you discover that you have been using the wrong pronoun, politely correct yourself. As an ally, you can also interrupt someone who is mispronouncing another person so that the burden of making this correction isn’t on the transgender person.

Transition

“Transition” is a term some transgender people use to refer to the period of their lives where they are crossing from one gender identity to another. To be a trans ally, don’t make assumptions that there is *one* way that transpeople experience their gender transition. There are many different ways that a trans person can transition from one gender identity to another. For some, transition can be a fluid experience constantly changing over the course of someone’s life. Transpeople “come out” as transgender at all different ages and may change their gender identity once, several times, frequently, or constantly. Some transpeople choose to change their names and pronouns, to have surgeries, and to take hormones, while other transpeople do some or none of these things. Some transpeople identify as both feminine and masculine depending on the day or circumstance.

Sexual Orientation

Gender identity and sexual orientation are not synonymous. Sexual orientation is about who you are attracted to. Gender identity is about how you identify your gender. Like non-transgender people, transpeople can identify as gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, queer, etc.

Names

Choosing a name is an important step in the transition process for many transpeople. Having a name that matches one's gender identity is not only important to allow people to live life as their full selves, but it is also important for their safety. A legal name change is required in order to change identity documents. Without identity documents that match an individual's gender presentation, people experience increased barriers to employment, housing, medical care, etc. It is never okay to ask someone what their "old" name or "real" name was. If a transperson wants you to know, they will tell you. For many transpeople, the name given to them at birth can carry a great deal of sadness connected to loss of families, jobs, feeling disconnected from self, etc.

Surgeries and Hormone Therapy

Medical options are a personal decision. As a trans ally, you should never ask transpeople invasive questions about their bodies. Most people wouldn't ask a non-transgender person whether they are on hormones or whether they have had surgeries, and it isn't respectful to ask a transperson these questions either. It is especially rude (and confusing) when transpeople are asked if they have had "the surgery." There are many different surgical options for transgender people, not one single surgery. It is also important to remember that not all transpeople have the option of medically transitioning by using hormones or by having gender-affirming surgeries. Many of these gender-affirming procedures are incredibly expensive and are often specifically excluded from health insurance plans for people who have health insurance. Also, many transpeople have no desire to transition medically. No matter how someone transitions, all genders should be respected and celebrated without regard for a hierarchy based on medical interventions and procedures.

Disclosing Identity and "Outing"

Transpeople may choose to be "out" in a variety of ways. It's up to each individual to decide if they want to disclose their gender history to others. Outing people as trans is disrespectful and a serious safety concern. Transpeople are subjected to violence, including murder, as a result of having their identities disclosed. Outing all too often leads to loss of employment, housing, family, and friends. Someone's gender identity is not something that should be gossiped about or casually shared with others.

Gendered Spaces and Facilities

Gendered spaces include but are not limited to prisons, jails, group homes, restrooms, and locker rooms. . When spaces are explicitly gendered, those who fall outside perceived social norms of gender can be subjected to violence, harassment, and discrimination.

Prisons and Jails

Prisons and jails are a harsh and demeaning environment for everyone who is locked up. There are three key problems faced by transgender and gender non-conforming people on the inside: 1) placement upon incarceration, 2) harassment and sexual violence, and 3) medical access.

Placement

Transgender inmates are placed according to sex assigned to them at birth in Illinois. If placed in general population, many transgender people face harassment and discrimination from other

inmates. For their safety, some elect to be placed in a Protective Custody Unit. Unfortunately, protective custody often means limited access to work and educational programs, limited or no access to the law library, and excessive periods of isolation. Thus, most transgender prisoners do not elect protective custody and instead are placed with a cellmate in the general population. Many cellmates are transphobic – afraid of transgender people – and use the institutional offense process to make false complaints against transgender cellmates so that they are removed from their cell and placed in administrative segregation – also known as solitary confinement. No matter where they are placed, they are not safe as women in men’s prisons, and vice versa.

Harassment and Sexual Violence

Because transwomen are women in men’s prisons, many are targets for sexual assault and sexual violence by other inmates as well as correctional staff. Many transwomen have been raped while incarcerated due to their gender identity. In addition, many report a culture of homophobia and transphobia; consistently being called “faggot”, “sissy” and “freak” by other inmates and correctional staff. Harassment also often occurs through mail tampering by correctional staff, unjustified frequent cell searches, and strip-searches without legitimate reason.

Medical Access

Transgender people have serious medical needs relating to their gender identity and unrelated to their gender identity. Like anyone else, they have illnesses and require medication. Many transgender people find that medical access is restricted for all medical needs due to transphobia on the part of the Facility Medical Director as well as medical unit staff. Most transgender people who are incarcerated are either removed from hormone therapy immediately upon entry into a facility, or are denied access to hormones or other trans related healthcare. The impact of being denied hormones can have serious emotional and physical consequences.

Restrooms

Do not police restrooms! Trans and gender non-conforming people may not match narrowly constructed gendered bathrooms which can be extremely unsafe for transpeople. Determining which restroom to use, or whether a restroom can be used, can also cause a great deal of anxiety for transpeople. Encourage businesses, schools, airports, museums, and government buildings to create non-gendered restrooms that are accessible for transgender people and others.

Transgender inclusion in the Mainstream Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement

Many mainstream gay and lesbian organizations have added the “T” and hold themselves out to be LGBT organizations, but have done little to nothing to support transgender communities. Don’t just add the “T” without doing the work! Consider the needs and wishes of transgender and gender non-conforming communities and individuals when doing activist work, and remember that transphobia is an institutionalized problem that we all need to actively work against to unlearn – including gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and even transgender people.

Listening to Trans Voices

Do not make assumptions about what services or political actions are needed for members of the transgender community. One of the biggest roles of an ally is to learn how to listen to the needs of others. Do not rely on one trans person to inform you or educate you about what the needs are of varying trans communities. It is not the job of transpeople to educate non-transpeople about transphobia. If you are in a position to create change, empower trans and gender non-conforming folks to lead the way and help them with the tools that may be necessary to do so.

Policing

As a result of barriers to education, employment, housing, and medical care many trans and gender non-conforming people live in poverty. Low-income communities face higher rates of policing and arrests. Many transwomen, particularly transwomen of color, are profiled and arrested for prostitution even when not engaging in the sex trade – many practitioners refer to this as “walking while trans” much like racial profiling is called “driving while Black.” As a result of the barriers listed above, some trans and gender non-conforming people may be forced to rely on survival crimes such as trespass, loitering, retail theft, etc.

Transphobia and Violence

Trans and gender-non conforming people, particularly transwomen of color, are subjected to higher rates of violence as a result of transphobia. Transpeople can experience violence due to being “outed” and for not “passing.” Transpeople suffer violence at the hands of law enforcement, correctional staff, family members, teachers, etc. The barriers listed above often times place transpeople in situations where acts of violence are more likely to occur including: homeless shelters, police profiling, jails, group homes, foster care, etc.

Action steps for being an Ally:

Educate Yourself by researching organizations, reading books and articles about trans and gender non-conforming people, and attending trainings and workshops.

Have Discussions with other non-transpeople about ways you can work against transphobia. Do not rely on transpeople to educate you about transphobia. Do not try to engage by discussing the latest film or book that came out about transgender people. If a trans person wants to talk to about a film or article, they will bring it up. It can be exhausting to have repeated conversations with people about trans identities without consent.

Recognize Oppression as an intersecting system of barriers that had lead to institutionalized racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism. The process of learning how to be an ally to transpeople includes an understanding of how all of these forms of oppression are connected. For example, transwomen of color are disproportionately represented in prisons and jails and are more likely to be victims of harassment and violence, experiencing an intersection of all of the above listed oppressions.

Educate Others once you have educated yourself about transphobia, transgender issues, and how to be a good ally.

Interrupt Transphobic Behavior whenever you see it happening and when it is safe to do so.

RESOURCES

Local Organizations:

Broadway Youth Center

3179 N. Broadway Chicago, IL 60657

773-935-3151

<http://www.howardbrown.org>

Young Women's Empowerment Project

<http://ywepchicago.wordpress.com/>

Project NIA

773-392-5165

<http://www.project-nia.org/>

Transformative Justice Law Project of Illinois

2040 N. Milwaukee Chicago, IL 60647

773-272-1822

www.tjlp.org

GenderJust

773-869-9825

www.genderjust.org

Howard Brown Health Center

4025 N. Sheridan Road Chicago, IL 60613

773-388-1600

www.howardbrown.org

Web Resources:

Gender Education and Advocacy www.gender.org

IFGE--International Foundation of Gender Education, Waltham, MA: <http://www.ifge.org>

Intersexed Society of North America: <http://www.isna.org>

Leading Transgender Organizations: <http://www.gendertalk.com>

PFLAG's Transgender Support Network: <http://www.critpath.org/pflag-talk/>

Sylvia Rivera Law Project: www.srlp.org

Transgender Law Center: <http://transgenderlawcenter.org/cms/>

TGI Justice Project: <http://www.tgijp.org/>

Books:

Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits, by Loren Cameron

Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us, by Kate Bornstein

GenderQueer, edited by Riki Wilchins, Joan Nestle, and Clare Howell

Exile and Pride, by Eli Claire

Honey, Honey, Miss Thang: Being Black, Gay and On the Streets, by Leon E. Pettitway

Normal Life, by Dean Spade

Queer Injustice, by Joey Mogul, Andrea Ritchie, Kay Whitlock

Transgender Rights, edited by Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang, and Shannon Price Minter

Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul, by Leslie Feinberg

Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink and Blue, by Leslie Feinberg

Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines, Practical Information and Personal Accounts, Gianna E. Israel and Donald E. Tarver, II, MD

Trans Forming Families: Real Stories about Transgendered Loved Ones, by Mary Boenke

True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism for Families, Friends, Coworkers and Helping Professionals, by Mildred L. Brown