

# Common LGBTQ+ Terms and Definitions

National Resource Center  
on LGBTQ+ Aging  
National Headquarters  
c/o Services & Advocacy  
for GLBT Elders (SAGE)  
305 Seventh Avenue  
6th Floor  
New York, NY 10001

212-741-2247 phone  
212-366-1947 fax

info@lgbtagingcenter.org  
lgbtagingcenter.org

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## Sexuality Terms

**Bisexual, Bi\*:** An individual who is physically, romantically, and/or emotionally attracted to more than one gender. “Bisexual” does not suggest having equal sexual experience with people of different genders. In fact, some people who identify as “bisexual” have not had any sexual experience at all.

**Dyke:** Slang for a lesbian. It originated as a negative label for a masculine or butch woman, and this usage still exists. It has been reclaimed by some as a positive word.

**Faggot/Fag:** An offensive, negative slang sometimes used to describe gay men.

**Gay\*:** A word used to describe anyone, mainly men, who have primary: physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to someone of the same sex, e.g., gay man, gay people. Many gay people prefer this term over “homosexual” which retains negative connotations. Lesbian can be a preferred term for a gay woman. While younger men may use the term “queer,” this term is generally considered offensive to older people.

**Heterosexual\*:** Used to describe people whose primary physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to people of the opposite sex; also known as straight.

**Homosexual:** An outdated clinical, medical term that is no longer the preferred word used to describe someone who is gay or lesbian. It has taken on negative connotations because of its previous use to denote a mental illness.

**Lesbian\*:** A woman whose primary physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to other women. Some lesbians may prefer to identify as gay (adj.) or as gay women. Many lesbians view “homosexual” as a derogatory term. While younger women may use the terms “dyke” or “queer,” these terms are generally considered offensive to older people.

**Pansexual\*\*:** Refers to a person who experiences emotional, romantic and/or physical attraction to people regardless of gender identity. Many pansexual people describe their attraction as focusing on an individual’s personality rather than their gender identity. People who are pansexual need not have had any sexual experience: It is the attraction and self-identification that determine the orientation.

**Same-Gender Loving (SGL)\*:** A cultural term used most frequently in communities of color that affirms the same-sex attraction of individuals. The term may be favored by some over the labels gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

**Sexual Orientation\*:** A person’s primary physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, heterosexual (straight), and other orientations. It is the accurate term and should be used instead of the offensive term “sexual preference,” which conveys the suggestion that being gay or lesbian is a choice and therefore can be “cured” or changed.

**Asexual:** Refers to a person who experiences little or no sexual attraction to other people. Many asexual people may also use the terms “Ace” or “Aces” to describe themselves. Asexual is oftentimes considered an umbrella term for people who experience little or no sexual attraction, and people who identify as asexual may use other terms to refer to their sexuality. It is important to reflect the language used by the asexual person when describing themselves, and it is always a good practice to ask how a person refers to their sexuality instead of making assumptions.

## Terms Related to the LGBTQ Community

**Family of Choice:** Diverse family structures usually created by LGBTQ+ people, immigrants, and racial or ethnic minorities, that include but are not limited to life partners, close friends, and other loved ones not biologically related or legally recognized, but who are the source of social and caregiving support.

**Family of Origin:** The family in which a person grows up, or the first social group a person belongs to, which is often a person’s biological family or an adoptive family.

**Gender affirmation surgery:** Surgery undergone by transgender people to make their sexual characteristics match their gender identity. Sometimes referred to as sex reassignment surgery or gender-affirming surgery.

**Intersectionality:** A term used to describe how we are all a combination of different traits or identities, such as culture, ethnicity, race, education, age, language, and also sexual orientation and gender identity.

**Sex\*:** The classification of people as male, female, or intersex based on their anatomy (genitals or reproductive organs) and/or biology (chromosomes and/or hormones).

**Sex Assigned at Birth:** At birth, infants are usually given a sex designation of male, female, or intersex by a doctor based on the child’s genitals.

**Transgender\*:** An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. The term may include but is not limited to transsexuals and cross-dressers. Transgender people may identify as female-to-male (FTM) or male-to-female (MTF). It is important to use the descriptive term (transgender, transsexual, cross-dresser, FTM or MTF) preferred by the individual. Transgender people may or may not decide to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically.

**Transition:** The process of changing genders in order to match the gender a person identifies as. This can include: Male-to-Female and Female-to-Male or Intersex.

**Lifestyle\***: Term used to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender lives, generally considered offensive to LGBTQ+ people. Just as there is no one straight “lifestyle,” there is no one lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender lifestyle.

**Outing\***: The act of publicly telling (sometimes based on rumor and/or speculation) or revealing another person’s sexual orientation or gender identity without that person’s consent. It is considered inappropriate by a large portion of the LGBTQ+ community, and can be very damaging socially, personally, and/or professionally to the individuals who are “outed.”

**Questioning\***: A person who is unsure about their sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Identity or Self Identify**: What people call themselves that expresses their internal reality. This may be different from external characteristics or how others might view them.

**LGBT/GLBT\*/LGBTQ+\*\***: Acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. LGBT and/or GLBT can be used interchangeably. Sometimes, LGBTQ or LGBTQ+ is used, which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer. The plus is used to indicate inclusion of the diverse number of identities that are not cisgender or heterosexual beyond what is listed in the acronym.

**LGBTQ+ Older Adults**: The preferred term for LGBTQ+ people 65, the current standard age of retirement, or older. The term “older adults” may be preferable to “old,” “senior,” “elderly” or “aging” (terms which many don’t identify with personally). LGBTQ+ or LGBT can be used interchangeably. Also acceptable are “older LGBTQ+ people” or “LGBTQ+ older people” depending on context.

**Partner**: A nondiscriminatory and gender neutral way to describe one of the people in a committed, long-term relationship.

**Queer\***: Historically a negative term, it is now being used by some LGBTQ+ people –mostly younger ones and as a broader term - to describe themselves. However, it is not universally accepted even within the LGBTQ+ community and should be avoided unless quoting or describing someone who self-identifies that way.

**Closeted, In the Closet or Stealth\***: Describes a person who does not share with others, or only shares with a few “safe” people, that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, or another non-heterosexual / non-cisgender identity.

**Coming Out\***: A lifelong process of self-acceptance of one’s sexual or gender identity that may include a sharing of that identity with others. How much people are “out” may differ by setting, people they are with, and life stage. The coming out process is unique for each individual, and is the choice of each individual. LGBTQ+ older adults often hide their sexual orientation or gender identity from their health care and social service providers (do not “come out”) for fear of being treated badly.

**Ally**: A person who works for social change for a group that faces injustice or disadvantage. The ally is not a member of that oppressed group but supports and fights for equality on behalf of the group, e.g. heterosexuals who support LGBTQ+ rights.

**Openly Gay\***: Describes people who self-identify as LGBTQ+ in their personal, public and/or professional lives. Terms such as openly lesbian, openly bisexual, and openly transgender are also used.

## Sex and Gender Terms

**Affirmed Gender\*\*:** An individual's true gender, as opposed to their gender assigned at birth. This term should replace terms like new gender or chosen gender, which imply that an individual chooses their gender.

**Deadnaming\*\*:** Occurs when an individual, intentionally or not, refers to the name that a transgender or gender-expansive individual used at a different time in their life. Avoid this practice, as it can cause trauma, stress, embarrassment, and even danger. Some may prefer the terms birth name, given name, or old name.

**Gender:** A person's internal sense of being male, female, or another gender. A person may choose to express their gender through culturally defined norms associated with masculinity and femininity, which may or may not align with a person's internal gender identity or with the sex they were assigned at birth.

**Gender Binary\*\*:** The disproven concept that there are only two genders, male and female, and that everyone must be one or the other. Also often misused to assert that gender is biologically determined.

**Gender Expression\*:** How a person outwardly expresses their gender identity and/or role; how they dress, walk, wear their hair, talk, etc. Typically, transgender people seek to make their gender expression match their gender identity, rather than their sex assigned at birth.

**Gender Identity\*:** The gender you feel you are inside (man, woman, somewhere in between, neither, or both). For transgender people, their birth-assigned gender and their personal sense of gender identity do not match. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Transgender people may be heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, or another sexual orientation. For example, a transgender woman who was assigned a male gender at birth and is attracted to other women may self-identify as a lesbian.

**Gender Perception:** How observers classify a person's gender.

**Gender Role:** Societal or ethnic/cultural expectations about how a person should dress, look, talk, and behave based on whether they are perceived as female, male, or another gender.

**Going Stealth:** A person living as a gender different from what was assigned to them at birth without people knowing or being able to tell that the person is transgender.

**Cisgender:** Individuals whose gender identity and/or gender expression do align with their biological or assigned sex. If someone was assigned the sex female at birth and identifies as a woman, she is cisgender.

**Gender Spectrum\*\*:** The concept that gender exists beyond a simple man/woman binary model (see *Gender Binary*), but instead exists on a continuum. Some people fall towards more masculine or feminine aspects, some people move fluidly along the spectrum, and some exist off the spectrum entirely.

**Hormone Therapy:** Use of hormone treatments to create characteristics that reflect the sex with which a person identifies.

**Intersex\*\*:** Intersex is the current term used to refer to people who are biologically between the medically expected definitions of male and female. This can be through variations in hormones, chromosomes, internal or external genitalia, or any combination of any or all primary and/or secondary sex characteristics. While many intersex people are noticed as intersex at birth, many are not. As intersex is about biological sex, it is distinct from gender identity and sexual orientation. An intersex person can be of any gender identity and can also be of any sexual orientation and any romantic orientation. Formerly, the medical terms hermaphrodite and pseudohermaphrodite were used; these terms are now considered neither acceptable nor scientifically accurate. You can go to the website for the [Intersex Society of America](#) to learn more about intersex people and related issues.

**Nonbinary\*\*:** this term describes people that have a gender identity that does not fall into the category of man or woman. Some use the term exclusively, while others may use it interchangeably with terms like genderqueer, genderfluid, gender nonconforming, gender diverse, or gender expansive. It can also be combined with other descriptors e.g. nonbinary woman. Nonbinary people may or may not consider themselves transgender. Sometimes abbreviated as NB or Enby, the term NB has historically been used to mean non-Black, so those referring to non-binary people should avoid using NB.

**Transsexual\*:** An older term that originated in the medical and psychological communities. While some transsexual people still prefer to use the term to describe themselves, many transgender people prefer the term transgender to transsexual. Unlike transgender, transsexual is not an umbrella term, as many transgender people do not identify as transsexual. It is best to ask which term an individual prefers.

**Two-Spirit\*:** The term refers to LGBTQ+ people and reflects traditions among many Native American nations that accept and celebrate the diversity of human gender, spirituality, and sexuality.

## **Terms for Issues that Impact LGBTQ+ People**

**Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS):** The last stage of the infection from Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) that attacks a person's white blood cells. This means they can no longer fight off sickness and disease.

**Bioessentialism\*\*:** Short for biological essentialism, this term describes the belief that the sex characteristics, chromosomal characteristics, or genitalia of a person should define gender identity. This belief is often used to discount transgender people, who might be born with characteristics that do not match their gender identity. Regardless of your personal beliefs about sex and gender, it is important to respect transgender identities and personal freedoms.

**Discrimination\*:** Unfair and unequal treatment in favor of or against an individual or group based on group identity; e.g. African American, female, Arabic, youth, or LGBTQ+. Discrimination is the actual behavior towards the individual(s).

**Heterosexism\*:** Belief that heterosexuality is the only "natural" sexuality and that it is inherently healthier or superior to other types of sexuality, including LGBTQ+ sexuality. The term refers to the negative attitudes, bias, and discrimination exhibited by people with this belief.

**Cissexism:** Belief that a cisgender or birth-assigned gender identity is the only “natural” gender identity, and that cisgender identities are inherently healthier or superior to other types of gender identities, including Transgender or gender expansive identities. The term refers to the negative attitudes, bias, and discrimination exhibited by people with this belief.

**Homophobia/Transphobia/Biphobia\*:** Homophobia refers to a fear of people who are not heterosexual. Biphobia is used to specifically describe a fear of bisexual people. Transphobia is used to describe a fear of transgender people. These phobias reflect prejudice, hatred, antipathy, and avoidance toward LGBTQ+ people. Some disability activists suggest that the terms “heterosexism” and “cissexism” are more representative than the terms homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia – as the term “phobia” refers to a common experience of people who have been exposed to traumas, and/or have a serious anxiety disorder. Using the term “phobia” to describe a non-phobic prejudice can misrepresent this experience. However, homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia are still common terms used to describe the fear of people in the LGBTQ+ community.

**Minority Stress:** The damaging physical and mental health effects of being stigmatized and/or the focus of prejudice and discrimination, which create a hostile and stressful environment.

\*This glossary of terms appears in the best practice guide, Strengthen Your State and Local Aging Plan: A Practical Guide for Expanding the Inclusion of LGBT Older Adults, [www.lgbtagingcenter.org/guides](http://www.lgbtagingcenter.org/guides) and is adapted from the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Media Reference Guide, [www.glaad.org](http://www.glaad.org)

\*\*This glossary was developed using the following additional sources:

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