

Understanding Pronouns – What they are and how to respect them

We use pronouns each and every day, as a short and simple alternative to using a proper noun. Pronouns are like shortcuts - they provide a faster and easier way to communicate without frequently repeating a noun. One type of pronoun is a personal pronoun - for example, we might use “he,” “she,” “you,” “they,” or “we” instead of repeating someone’s name. In the English language, pronouns, when used to refer to people in the third person, are often gendered, meaning that we assume an individual’s pronouns based on our perception of their gender.

Why Does Using the Correct Pronouns Matter?

Using someone’s pronouns shows that we respect who they are and how they want to be described. For trans people, using incorrect pronouns indicates that you don’t see them as the person and gender that they know themselves to be. This is what we call ‘misgendering.’ At its core, misgendering is a way of telling someone that we think we know who they are better than they do.

How Can I Respect Someone’s Pronouns?

The best way to respect everyone’s pronouns is to never assume what someone’s pronouns are without asking them, and to provide opportunities for individuals to disclose their pronouns, while using gender neutral language until their personal pronouns are confirmed. It is also important to encourage others to adopt this practice. A great way to try this out is by disclosing your own pronouns as a way of starting a conversation. Sharing your pronouns is an invitation for others to do the same. It shows trans and gender diverse people that you are safe for them to be out and honest with.

Example: “Hi, my name is Lisa, and I’m an intake nurse here at the clinic. I use she and her pronouns. What can I help you with today?”

What if You Don't Know, and Don't Have an Opportunity to Ask?

In this situation, using gender-neutral language is a good place to start. In using gender-neutral language, we avoid unintentionally using incorrectly gendered pronouns or terms.

Some gender-neutral terms or pronouns feel more difficult to use than others. If we're used to using "they" in a plural context, it can take time and effort to normalize using it to refer to individual people, and that's okay. Practice using "they" and "them" to refer to individual people, and it'll feel natural in no time.

Respecting Privacy and Autonomy

Asking people for their pronouns, and disclosing your own, is an important part of creating a welcoming and inclusive environment. Nonetheless, it is important to be intentional about how and when we ask people their pronouns. Individuals should never be pressured to disclose pronouns or put on the spot to do so in public spaces where they may not necessarily feel safe enough.

Asking people their pronouns is best done during private conversations, rather than in public spaces. If you do not know someone's pronouns, opt for gender-neutral options, like 'they' or 'them,' or stick to their name, until you have an opportunity to ask.

Some trans people may use different names and/ or pronouns in different contexts. This is often due to safety considerations, and is particularly common for trans people who may not be 'out' publicly as trans. Some trans people, for example, will be 'out' with their friends, but not with their family, and therefore may use two different sets of names and pronouns. In these scenarios, it is best to speak with the trans person in question to confirm which pronouns/name to use in different scenarios. Managing different names and pronouns may sound complicated - and indeed it can be - but is of the utmost importance to protect the privacy, confidentiality and safety of trans clients.

Embracing Diverse Pronouns

While 'he/him,' 'she/her' and 'they/them' are by far the most common pronouns, many trans people use other pronouns to describe themselves. These include new or 'neo' pronouns, like 'ze and zer,' or pronouns associated with different communities, cultures, and languages. Regardless, all people deserve to have their pronouns respected, even if those pronouns are new to us. If you encounter new pronouns, practice them in your head or in front of a mirror until they become easier for you to remember and use. It is also important to note that many people use multiple sets of pronouns.

For example, an individual might use both 'she' and 'they' pronouns. In most cases, if individuals use multiple pronouns, you are generally welcome to use either, or both, at your discretion. In group contexts, adding pronouns to introductions is an important way to

signal acceptance and inclusion of trans people. However, it is equally important to allow people to opt-out of disclosing their pronouns if they so choose. Additionally, not all people use pronouns at all – some people simply prefer to have their name used instead. If you are hosting a meeting, you may prompt others to introduce themselves, using the following example:

“Hi everyone! My name is Mark. I use ‘they’ and ‘he’ pronouns, and I’m based in Waterloo. I’d like to invite everyone to introduce themselves, their names, where they’re located, and, if they’d like, their pronouns”.

This approach models inclusion by inviting people to disclose their pronouns, without putting pressure on them to do so if they would prefer not to.

Where Do We Go Wrong?

Many of us are used to assuming someone’s gender and pronouns based on our perception of how they look. We make assumptions, largely without noticing it, based on people’s hairstyles, clothing, makeup (or lack thereof), physique, and more. If we can acknowledge that everyone has a right to express their gender however they would like – that men can wear dresses or makeup, and that women can wear masculine clothing and cut their hair short – then we must acknowledge that we can’t possibly know an individual’s gender, or their pronouns, based on a superficial assessment. By assuming an individual’s pronouns or gender identity based on how they look, we are making assumptions that reinforce harmful gender roles, and imposing our own loaded assumptions about gender onto others

Normalizing Pronouns Means Unpacking All of Our Assumptions About Gender

One common mistake people make is to only ever ask people they think are trans or gender diverse about their pronouns. However, you cannot tell if a person is trans just by looking at them. Similarly, you cannot know a person’s gender based on their appearance. Any person you meet, whether you know it or not, might be trans. We need to normalize asking for pronouns and disclosing our own - otherwise, we inadvertently make harmful assumptions about people’s identities. This simple practice avoids awkward and possibly hurtful mistakes while showing trans people the respect they deserve.