

El Camino

LGBTQ+ Definitions

The words LGBTQ+ people use to describe themselves and their communities are constantly evolving, and they regularly develop new terms and alter existing ones to better fit their lives and experiences. The definitions we present here are the most current, so they may be different than those you've heard in the past and may also change in the next few years. This is not an exhaustive list—there are many terms that people in the LGBTQ+ community use to describe themselves that are not included here, and people from different countries and cultures may have their own definitions for these terms. Asking people what terms they use and what these terms mean for them is important and is an excellent way to affirm someone's identity.

Sexuality refers to a pattern of who people are sexually attracted to over time.

Asexual (Ace) – people who experience little to no sexual attraction to people of any gender. Some asexual people experience romantic attraction to people of different genders and want to be in a romantic relationship, and other asexual people don't experience romantic attraction to people of any gender and prefer to be in non-romantic relationships. Other asexual people don't experience romantic attraction to people of any gender and prefer relationships that aren't romantic. Asexuality is also an umbrella term that may include people who experience sexual attraction only in specific circumstances or under specific conditions—for example, only after a strong emotional bond has been formed.

Bisexual (Bi) – people who are attracted to people of the same and other genders. Bisexuality is a spectrum; bisexual people can be attracted to people of any gender in different ways and be attracted to people of some genders more than others.

Gay – historically seen as men who are attracted to other men. It can also be used as an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ people. People of all genders sometimes use this term.

Heteronormative – refers to the idea that heterosexuality is the norm and anything that's not heterosexuality is abnormal. This idea has deep cultural roots and pressures people to identify as heterosexual.

Lesbian – historically seen as women who are attracted to other women. It can also include non-binary and transmasculine people if they choose to identify as lesbian.

LGBTQ+ – an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other identities.

Pansexual (Pan) – people who are attracted to people of all genders. Like bisexual people, pansexual people can be attracted to people of each gender in different ways and be attracted to people of some genders more than others. Gender is not as relevant for pansexual people as it is for bisexual people.

Queer^a – both a general descriptor of people who are not heterosexual as well as a specific identity. It can also be associated with a rejection of labels and gendered concepts like the gender binary. It has been used as a slur against LGBTQ+ people, so even though it has been reclaimed by the community, it is important to be mindful that some LGBTQ+ people, especially those who are older, may not be comfortable with being called queer. It is important to use the terms people prefer to describe their identities and experiences.

Romantic attraction – an emotional response people experience when they desire to be in a romantic relationship with someone. This is different from sexual attraction because it does not necessarily indicate a sexual relationship.

Sexual attraction – an emotional response people experience when they desire to have sexual contact with someone. This is different from romantic attraction because it does not necessarily indicate a romantic relationship.

Gender is a socially constructed identification that refers to a constellation of behaviors, norms, and characteristics that vary by culture and over time.

AFAB – acronym for assigned female at birth. People use “assigned” to reflect that gender and sex assignments at birth are generally based on physical characteristics and may not be accurate to a person’s experience or even biological context such as hormonal and genetic contributions.

Agender – used to describe people who don’t experience a gender. Agender people see gender as something that is abstract and doesn’t relate to or resonate with them.

AMAB – acronym for assigned male at birth. People use “assigned” to reflect that gender and sex assignments at birth are generally based on physical characteristics and may not be accurate to a person’s experience or even biological context such as hormonal and genetic contributions.

Cisgender (Cis) – people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.

Cis het – people who are both cisgender and heterosexual; this term is short for cisgender, heterosexual.

Cisnormative – refers to the idea that being cisgender is the norm and anyone who is not cisgender is abnormal. This idea has deep cultural roots and pressures people to identify as cisgender.

Gender binary – refers to a system that classifies people as either men or women based on assigned sex and gender at birth. The gender binary relies on there being only two genders and those two genders being different from one another.

^a In this resource, we use queer to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, and queer people.

Gender dysphoria – refers to the distress people experience when their gender identity and assigned gender are different.

Gender expression – refers to how people show their gender, often through appearance and behavior.

Gender identity – refers to someone’s internal sense or understanding of their gender.

Gender non-conforming (GNC) – used to describe people whose gender expression doesn’t conform to the societal expectations of their assigned gender.

Genderfluid – used to describe people who fluctuate between different gender identities. For example, some days a genderfluid person may feel more like a boy, some days they may feel more like a girl, and other days they may feel like another gender outside of the binary.

Genderqueer – used to describe people whose gender identity is queer or outside of the norms set by cisnormativity. This term originated in political circles within the queer liberation movement, and many people who use the term also identify their sexual orientation as queer, or not straight. Although genderqueer and non-binary are both terms used to indicate that a person does not have a binary identification, the use of the term “queer” in genderqueer indicates a perspective aimed at dismantling current ways of thinking about gender.

Intersex – this term encompasses any natural variation in sex characteristics that falls outside the binary definitions of male and female. There are many recognized variations in sex characteristics, which include variations in external genitalia, hormones, internal reproductive organs, or a combination of any of these.

Non-binary – can be used as an umbrella term to include people whose gender identity is outside of the gender binary and as a specific identifier. Non-binary people can have different conceptions of their gender with some relating to binary experiences and others not relating to those experiences.

Physical transition – refers to the process of making physical changes to one’s body through hormone therapy and/or surgeries to better align their physical body to their gender identity.

Social transition – refers to the process of changing non-physical aspects of one’s gender identity, such as their name and pronouns, and incorporating new aspects of gender expression into day-to-day life.

Transgender (Trans) – an umbrella term used to describe people who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Trans women are women who were assigned male at birth (AMAB) and trans men are men who were assigned female at birth (AFAB). Sometimes the term trans is used to specifically talk about trans men and women, and sometimes it is used to talk about all people who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Non-binary and genderqueer people are included in this definition, but not all non-binary and genderqueer people choose to also identify as trans. There are no requirements to “being” trans other than not identifying with your gender assigned at birth.^b

^b Note that in the past, people have used the word “transsexual” instead of “transgender”. This term is considered offensive to some trans people. Some trans people do still self-identify as “transsexual,” but cisgender people should never refer to a trans person as “transsexual” unless explicitly given permission to do so by that trans person.

Transfeminine - used to describe AMAB people who identify with femininity in terms of gender identity or gender expression. This can include trans women and non-binary people.

Transmasculine - used to describe AFAB people who identify with masculinity in terms of gender identity or gender expression. This can include trans men and non-binary people.

Two-Spirit - used as an umbrella term to describe Indigenous people who conceptualize themselves outside of the dominant cisgender and heterosexual ways of identifying. This specific term was created as a pan-Native American identifier and has only been in use for a few decades. However, the concept has deep and varied roots in Indigenous communities and should never be used by people outside of those communities. Additionally, just because someone is LGBTQ+ and Native American doesn't mean that they're Two-Spirit, and just because someone is Two-Spirit doesn't mean they identify as LGBTQ+.

¹Thorne, N., Yip, A. K., Bouman, W. P., Marshall, E., & Arcelus, J. (2019). The terminology of identities between, outside and beyond the gender binary - A systematic review. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 20(2-3), 138-154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2019.1640654>

²Ellasante, I. K. (2021). Radical sovereignty, rhetorical borders, and the everyday decolonial praxis of Indigenous peoplehood and Two-Spirit reclamation. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 44(9), 1507-1526.