



# Basic Definitions

## Sexual orientation and gender identity

### Sexual Orientation

Describes to whom a person is sexually attracted. Some people are attracted to people of a particular gender; others are attracted to more than one gender. Some are not attracted to anyone. Sometimes the term “affectional orientation” is used to acknowledge that attraction can be about more than sexual desire.

**Asexual** ~ not attracted sexually to anyone and/or no desire to act on their attraction to anyone. Does not necessarily mean sexless.

**Bisexual** ~ attracted to both women and men, and/or attracted to people regardless of gender. Two common misconceptions are that bisexual people are attracted to everyone and anyone, or that they just haven’t “decided.” Often referred to as “bi.” See also Pansexual.

**Heterosexual** ~ attracted to people of the “opposite” gender (though this assumes there are only two genders, see below). Often referred to as “straight.”

**Homosexual** ~ attracted to people of the same gender. Most men prefer “gay” and most women prefer “lesbian.” “Homosexual” is seen by some today as a medicalized term that should be retired from common use.

**Pansexual** ~ attracted to people regardless of gender. Sometimes also or alternately “omnisexual” or “polysexual.” See also Queer.

**Questioning** ~ a term used to describe someone who is unsure of or exploring their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

**Queer** ~ a) attracted to people of many genders; b) self-identity label for people who feel they do not fit cultural sexual orientation and/or gender identity norms; c) sometimes used as an umbrella term for all people with non-heterosexual sexual orientations; d) historically, a pejorative term – its use today is met with disfavor by some and worn proudly by others.

### Gender Identity and Expression

The ways in which a person chooses to identify and/or express their gender, including self-image, appearance, and embodiment of gender roles. One’s sex (e.g., male, female, intersex, etc.) is usually assigned at birth based on one’s physical biology. One’s gender (e.g., man, woman, transgender, genderqueer, etc.) is how one chooses to identify. One’s gender expression (e.g., masculine, feminine, androgynous, etc.) is how one embodies gender attributes, presentations, roles, and more.

**Androgyny** ~ The mixing of male and female gender characteristics or the lack of gender identification. An *androgyny* is a person who does not fit clearly into one gender. An androgyny may identify as someone who is moving beyond gender or across genders, is between genders, is genderless, or some combination thereof. See also Genderqueer.

**Crossdresser** ~ Cross-dressing refers to occasionally wearing clothing of the “opposite” gender, and someone who considers this an integral part of their identity may identify as a crossdresser (note: the term *crossdresser* is preferable to *transvestite* and neither may ever be used to describe a transsexual person). Cross-dressing is not necessarily tied to erotic activity or sexual orientation.

**Genderqueer / Third Gender / Two-Spirit** ~ These identity labels are used by people who feel between and/or other than man or woman. Individuals may identify as being neither, as a little bit of both, or they may simply feel restricted by gender labels. *Two spirit* is a term derived from the traditions of some Native North American cultures, and can sometimes mean a mixture of masculine and feminine spirits living in the same body.



**Intersex** ~ A general term used for a variety of genetic, hormonal, or anatomical conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. Some intersex individuals identify as transgender or gender variant; others do not. (Note: *Hermaphrodite* is an obsolete term that is not currently considered appropriate.)

**Transgender** ~ The word *transgender* was first coined as a way of distinguishing gender benders with no desire for surgery or hormones from *transsexuals*, those who desired to legally and medically change their sex. More recently *transgender* and/or *trans* has become an umbrella term that is popularly used to include all people who transgress dominant conceptions of gender, or at least all people who identify themselves as doing so. The definition continues to evolve.

**Transsexual** ~ The term *transsexual* has historically been used to refer to individuals who have medically and legally changed their sex, or who wish to do so. Most transsexual people feel a conflict between their gender identity and the sex they were assigned at birth. Other labels used within this group are MtF (male-to-female) and FtM (female-to-male).

For more on gender identity, please see Between & Beyond: [www.uua.org/lgbt/identity/25348.shtml](http://www.uua.org/lgbt/identity/25348.shtml).

## Commonly Used Terms

**Biphobia** ~ Aversion of and/or prejudice toward bisexuality and bisexuals as a social group or as individuals, based on negative stereotypes of bisexuality and the invisibility of bisexual people. People of any sexual orientation can experience/exhibit biphobia.

**Coming Out** ~ Openly stating one's identity. The term goes back to 1869 when gay people were urged to openly be themselves in Germany at the start of their gay rights movement (which was squashed by Hitler's rise). Being *out* means being open about one's identity. Being *outed* means someone else has disclosed one's identity, usually without one's permission.

**Gender Binary** ~ A system of classifying sex and gender into two distinct and disconnected forms; dividing people into masculine and feminine bodies, identities, roles, and attributes; and policing people to make sure they don't digress from the system in appearance, anatomy, or behavior.

**Heterosexism** ~ The presumption that everyone is heterosexual and/or the belief that heterosexuality is a superior expression of sexuality. Often includes the use of power of the majority (heterosexuals) to reinforce this belief and forgetting the privileges of being heterosexual in our society.

**Homophobia** ~ Negative attitudes and feelings toward people with non-heterosexual sexualities; dislike of, or discomfort with, expressions of sexuality that do not conform to heterosexual norms. Homophobia can result in avoidance, discrimination, and violence against people perceived or known to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. See also Biphobia and Transphobia.

**Internalized Oppression** ~ In reference to LGBT people, internalized oppression is the belief that heterosexual and non-transgender people are "normal" or better than LGBT people, as well as the often-unconscious belief that negative stereotypes about LGBT people are true.

**LGBT** ~ An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. This is currently the most popular way to refer to all sexual and gender minorities in U.S. society, although other letters are often included as well to represent identities described above.

**Transphobia** ~ Negative attitudes and feelings toward transgender and/or transsexual individuals, and/or gender variance more broadly; dislike of, or discomfort with, people whose gender identity and/or gender expression do not conform to traditional or stereotypic gender roles. Transphobia can result in avoidance, discrimination, and violence against people perceived or known to be transgender or gender nonconforming. See also Biphobia and Homophobia.