

A beginner's guide to being an ally to trans people

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Transgender Awareness Week is a time where we share and uplift the voices and experiences of the trans community, which includes celebrating the victories of trans folk while also remembering and honoring all members of our trans family who have lost their lives to anti-trans violence.

As a part of uplifting the trans community, it's important that allies also take part. Of course, everybody is at different levels of knowledge on how to support trans people. So, as someone who is currently discovering their transness and also had to do a lot of learning and internal work on my journey, here is my beginner's guide to being a trans ally.

Listen to trans people

Listen to what the trans people in your community are saying, and make sure that in your work as an ally, you are centering trans people and not yourself. Listening in allyship means more than just hearing what a trans person says when something is wrong. Listening in allyship means that there is a continuous conversation happening and action being taken about things that may affect trans people, such as the language people in a given space use, having bathrooms accessible to people of all genders (all-gender or gender neutral bathrooms), and creating an environment that feels comfortable for trans people to vocalize their issues.

When you listen to trans people in your life, you will find out that trans people are not a monolith. Trans people come from all different backgrounds and have different experiences, and therefore have different needs. Asking the trans people in your life how you can best support them should always be a first step. Sometimes, trans people aren't out to everyone in their lives for a variety of reasons, so knowing who they aren't out to can be necessary so that you don't accidentally out them and put them in a potentially dangerous position.

State your pronouns

Introducing yourself as a cisgender person with your pronouns - which are words that are used to refer to someone without using their name - can make a more inclusive and safe environment for trans people to also share their pronouns. By normalizing the practice of sharing your pronouns in your communities, you lighten the pressure on trans people. This also lowers the chance for unintentional misgendering to happen.

Another easy way to normalize sharing your pronouns is to add your pronouns to your social media bios or email signature. By adding your pronouns by your name or at the end of your bio, you can help foster a more trans-friendly social media environment.

When you mess up: Apologize and move forward

We all make mistakes, and that's okay as long as you are working to educate yourself. However, there are some things you should avoid when responding to being corrected for misgendering. The responses of "Oh I'm SO sorry, I'm the worst, most terrible person ever," is not appropriate. Excuses such as "Oh but I knew you as *deadname* and *wrong pronouns* for so long, I just need time to get used to it," is also not appropriate. These, one, center you and can potentially make your trans friend feel like they're burdening you and, two, totally disrupt the flow of conversation and make things awkward. A simple "I'm sorry! Thank you for correcting me," and continuing the conversation with the correct pronoun usage is, in my experience, the way to go.

Use gender inclusive language

Simply changing some of the words that you use can make a better, more trans-inclusive environment. For day to day conversation, saying "Hey ya'll!" or "Welcome everyone" instead of "Hey guys!" or "Welcome ladies and gentlemen" is a welcome, gender-inclusive change. Also, as someone originally from California, I used to say "bro" and "bruh" as a gender-neutral response. However, although my intention is not to potentially misgender someone, the impact of my words can be that someone takes it as that they're being misgendered, so I'm actively trying to take it out of my day-to-day language. You can also have a conversation with the people in your life about similar words and phrases, like "sis," "queen," "king," "girl," in reference to them. I know, personally, I love the word "monarch" as a gender-neutral alternative to hyping someone up by calling them "king" or "queen."

In addition, consider changing how you discuss topics like reproductive health. For example, take the "feminine" out of "feminine hygiene products." You can also just say pads and tampons. This distinction serves as a reminder that many trans-men and non-binary people also have periods and use these products and that there is nothing inherently "feminine" about these objects. Another example is when you're talking about sexual health - instead of saying male condoms and female condoms, refer to them as external condoms and internal condoms, respectively.

Recognize that being transgender is not about how someone looks

Being trans is not about dressing and acting a certain way. Being trans is a state of existing as one's truth, regardless of what they are wearing and how they look. A transwoman can have short hair and wear masculine clothing and still be a woman. A transman can wear a dress and make-up and still be a man. An agender person can wear traditionally masculine

or feminine clothing and still be agender. Trans people don't owe anyone anything when it comes to how they dress, how they talk, and how they act. Trans women don't need to be feminine, trans men don't need to be masculine, and gender non-conforming, non-binary, and agender people don't need to be androgynous. Nothing that trans people do or wear can invalidate their identity. Period.

Accept that just because you don't understand an identity doesn't make it not real

Everybody exists at a different level of experiences and knowledge on any given topic, and that includes knowledge on queerness and transness. I had extremely limited knowledge on what being trans meant before I came to college. However, just because you've never heard about those identities before does not mean that those identities have never existed. The resources to understand trans people and all the specific identities that are under the trans umbrella exist. It isn't something that you will become fully knowledgeable on overnight, but what's important is that, as an ally, you are putting in effort to understand.

It is also important to acknowledge that trans people don't owe anyone the time and energy to explain everything to their allies. Having to explain your identity, and essentially make an argument that you do, in fact, exist, is extremely emotionally and mentally laborious. If anyone takes the time to explain their identity to you, make sure to not take that for granted and thank them.

Also, you don't need a full understanding of anyone to use their correct name and pronouns. Even if, in the moment, you don't understand someone's identity, you can and should still use their correct name and pronouns.

Show up for the trans community

Although making the effort to be trans-inclusive in your interpersonal interactions is important, allyship doesn't end there. Showing up for the trans community by going to rallies and protests for trans people is important. Use your privilege to uplift trans voices and bring awareness to their issues. Going out and voting for politicians that take trans lives and safety as an important focus is another way to show up for the trans community. Donating to various non-profits centering trans people, such as the National Center for Transgender Equality, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and Gender Spectrum, is also a good way to show up for your trans siblings.

No matter how you show up as an ally, remember, during Trans Week and every week make a commitment to **listen to trans voices**.