



A project of the CA LGBT Health & Human Service Network and NorCal Mental Health America

Pronouns: Why, how, when, and what if I mess up?

When people refer to us in the third person, they use gendered pronouns. Pronouns can be useful to avoid clunky phrasing, like repeating a person’s name over and over. Some examples of pronouns and the ways that they are used are shown below:

Subject	Object	Possessive	Reflexive
He	Him	His	Himself
<i>He loves his dog and his dog loves him. He walks his dog himself.</i>			
She	Her	Her(s)	Herself
<i>She loves her dog and her dog loves her. She walks her dog herself.</i>			
They	Them	Their(s)	Themselves / Themselves
<i>They love their dog and their dog loves them. They walk their dog themselves.</i>			
Ey (“ay”)	Em (“em”)	Eir (“air”)	Eirself
<i>Ey loves eir dog and eir dog loves em. Ey walks eir dog emself.</i>			
Ze (“zee”)	Zir or Hir (“zee” or “here”)	Zir(s) or Hir(s)	Zirself or Hirself
<i>Ze loves zir dog and zir dog loves zir. Ze walks zir dog zirself.</i>			
[Name]	[Name]	[Name]’s	[Name]self
<i>Reed loves Reed’s dog and Reed’s dog loves Reed. Reed walks Reed’s dog Reedself.</i>			

Why do we ask about pronouns?

People use a variety of pronouns. You cannot tell just by how a person looks what pronouns to use. Asking a person their gender pronoun is the direct, respectful, and simple way to learn about their pronouns.

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How do I ask about pronouns?

If you're asking a group, you should propose that the group share their pronouns while introducing themselves and then model for the group how to share pronouns by sharing your own. If you're asking an individual, just ask! You can ask by saying "What pronouns do you use?" or "What pronouns can I use to refer to you?"

How should I respond when people ask me and people around me about pronouns?

For a lot of people, pronouns are deeply personal and important, regardless of which pronouns they use or why they use those pronouns. When someone asks you, they are telling you that they care and that they want to treat you with respect.

Sometimes we laugh or giggle when we find ourselves in unfamiliar circumstances. People who are not used to thinking about their gender or their pronouns may feel uncomfortable. Don't giggle or roll your eyes when saying your own pronouns or when hearing other people's pronouns.

When and in what spaces should this happen?

Trans people¹ exist in all spaces, so you should make asking this question a regular practice. Asking a person or group to share their pronouns helps to signal that the space is trans-affirming. It creates an opportunity for cisgender² people to think about the common spaces that they share with trans people and how to respectfully interact with trans people in their lives. Finally, it provides everyone with the knowledge and skills to treat each other with respect.

What if I mess up?

Humans make mistakes. What matters is to show that you're trying. If you mess up, simply repeat what you just said using the correct pronoun and don't make a big deal of it. Whoever you're talking to will most likely appreciate the effort.

¹ Trans is an umbrella term to refer to people who identify as a broad variety of genders other than the sex assigned to them at birth. It includes transgender, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, two-spirit, and more.

² Cisgender = not trans

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