TRANS ALLYSHIP WORKBOOK

Building Skills to Support Trans People in Our Lives

BY DAVEY SHLASKO
Illustrated by Kai Hofius

Madison, Wisconsin · 2017

THINK AGAIN

TRANS ALLYSHIP WORKBOOK
Building Skills to Support Trans People in Our Lives

© 2017 DAVEY SHLASKO
ILLUSTRATIONS BY KAI HOFIUS

PUBLISHED BY THINK AGAIN TRAINING
MADISON, WI

The previous edition, titled
Trans* Ally Workbook: Getting Pronouns Right and
What It Teaches Us About Gender, was published in 2014 by Think Again Training, then based in Oakland, CA. Most of the content of Chapter 4, including the sections “What are Pronouns?,” “Why Pronouns Matter,” and “Barriers to Getting Pronouns Right, and How to Overcome Them” are drawn from that edition with only minor updates.

“How Using They as a Singular Pronoun Can Change the World” was originally published on Feministing.com in February, 2015.
INTRODUCTION

ALLYSHIP (n.): Informed, accountable action that contributes to other people's ability to survive and thrive in a context of inequality.

The aim of this book is to help you get better at understanding and supporting trans people in your community. Maybe you have a trans friend, relative or colleague, and want to make sure you’re being as welcoming and supportive as possible. Maybe you learned from a news story about challenges that trans people face, and want to do your part to be part of the solution. Maybe you’re a teacher or service provider, witnessing firsthand how trans students and community members are not always served well by institutions that are meant to help them.

Whatever your motivation, you’re not alone. Trans people have become more visible in mainstream media and communities, yet remain vulnerable to discrimination and violence. Many people are aware of this and looking for ways to be a better ally. This book is for you.

This book is also for trans people like me, who want to be better allies to other trans people whose experiences differ from our own. Trans communities are diverse, and what each of us needs from our allies can vary widely. The kinds of support and acknowledgment that feel good to, say, a trans woman military veteran in her sixties are likely to be very different than what feels good to a nonbinary fourteen-year-old high school student. What works for someone who is newly exploring their trans identity will be different than what works for someone who transitioned decades ago. What makes sense for someone whose gender is honored in their indigenous culture may be different than what makes sense for someone whose gender bucks their culture’s expectations. Even as we are often called upon to teach our friends and loved ones (and unfortunately, our teachers and therapists and doctors) how to be the allies we need, we should remember that we are also learners, and keep working to be better allies to each other.

This book is not meant to teach you how to be an activist for trans rights—although it might help, if activism is part of your life. Participating in trans movements is super important, and allies can play vital roles. Many brilliant trans leaders and organizations are publishing work on trans movement strategy (see for example Reina Gossett, Dean Spade, Southerners On New Ground [SONG], Transgender Law Center, Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Gender Justice League and others) and you should absolutely go learn from them. This book is about the personal stuff—how we go about our days in communities and organizations where trans people are marginalized, in a way that helps trans people survive and thrive. It’s about how we make sure that our best intentions of being welcoming and supportive actually translate into action that comes across that way.

The first edition of this book came out about three and a half years ago. Since then, we have seen a dramatic increase in the visibility of trans people in mainstream media and communities in the U.S. Politically active trans celebrities like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock are widely known even outside LGBTQ communities, unlike most trans leaders and artists of previous decades. Non-famous trans people are visible as both authors and subjects of mainstream media in widely-read outlets like the Huffington Post and the New York Times.

This visibility is recent, but it was made possible by decades of advocacy and struggle. Trans activists and our allies have successfully lobbied for legal protections against discrimination in some states, along with more realistic requirements for those who want to change the gender
on their government-issued ids. In the medical realm, acceptance is slowly growing for a more patient-centered approach to transition-related medical care. Many schools, human service agencies, and businesses now understand that training their staff to work respectfully and effectively with trans people is an important part of their overall diversity and inclusion efforts. Each of these successes enables greater visibility, and greater visibility brings further positive change even closer.

Unfortunately, visibility also has some downsides. At the same time as sympathetic news stories about trans folks (especially trans children) have ballooned, reports of violent attacks against trans people, especially trans women of color, have also skyrocketed. It’s hard to tell how much this reflects an increase in violence as opposed to an increase in attention to the violence that has always been rampant. But it’s not hard to imagine that some people who hold bigoted feelings against trans people might feel more motivated to act on those feelings after seeing news stories about trans people living, working, and going to school in their communities. On a political level, we’ve seen aggressive and ill-informed anti-trans initiatives that seek to prevent trans people from using public restrooms, from changing the gender category on our identity documents, from accessing usable health insurance, and more.

Another downside of the increase in media attention is that much of the media coverage is oversimplified, disrespectful, or just lazy journalism. It tends to focus repetitively on a few stereotyped kinds of stories, like the innocent trans child who has “always known,” or the “first trans ______” who is ostensibly breaking barriers by holding a particular kind of job. Many of these news stories emphasize the reporter’s naivety, confusion or amazement. Trans issues are portrayed as new, complicated, or scandalous, with the effect of exoticizing situations that are (for better or worse) totally ordinary in trans life. Such coverage may leave you knowing less than you did before about how to talk to and about trans people respectfully. Meanwhile, other, more nuanced trans stories remain untold.

So how do we go about becoming better allies? In the trans inclusion trainings I provide for teachers, human services providers, and communities, I strive to balance two important goals: On one hand, I want people to really “get it” about what it means to be trans—to understand both intellectually and emotionally who trans people are and what we might need in order to survive and thrive in a society that marginalizes us. On the other hand, whether or not they “get it,” I want people to know what to do and say (and just as importantly, what not to do and say) in order to welcome trans people they encounter. Of course, the more you “get it,” the more doing and saying the right thing will come naturally. But that deeper kind of learning takes time, so sometimes you have to “fake it ’til you make it”—do the right thing even if you don’t yet understand exactly why it’s right.

In this book, I’ve tried to strike the same balance. Some sections focus on “getting it,” mostly by explaining trans identities and experiences and offering opportunities for reflection. Other sections focus on concrete actions you can take to support trans individuals and communities. Throughout, you’ll find practical and reflective exercises you can use to hone your allyship. I encourage you to work on both the practical and the conceptual, but feel free to start with whatever section feels most useful to you. Most sections will make sense even out of order. When you’ve taken in the pieces that feel most urgent, you can come back to explore the rest.

Throughout the book, I mention publications and organizations that you can turn to for further information. These are listed, along with even more resources, in the resource list beginning on p. 91.

A quick note on terminology: The language we use to talk about trans issues is constantly evolving. Brief definitions are provided throughout the book for words that may be new to many readers, and there is a glossary at the end with more extensive explanations. People use these terms in a
A variety of ways, and their usage has changed and will continue to change over time. Terminology also varies regionally, so this book is most directly relevant to readers in the U.S., although readers in other English-speaking places have also found it useful. When referring to an individual’s identity, it’s more important to understand what that person means by the terms they use, rather than to memorize the “standard” definitions.
CHAPTER TWO:
What is Trans, and Who are Trans People?

In order to understand what trans encompasses and who trans people are, we first have to understand what gender is and isn’t.

Very broadly, gender is a system of categorizing people according to factors like anatomy, identity, appearance, and mannerisms, and attributing meaning to those categories. Different cultures have different gender systems in terms of what gender categories are acknowledged (men, women, and other categories), the meanings attached to the categories (gender roles, stereotypes and expectations), and which factors (anatomy, identity, etc.) are most important in determining someone’s category. If you’re interested in exploring gender diversity across cultures, Serena Nanda’s book Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations is a great place to start. (However, be aware that Nanda uses some academic/anthropology jargon that’s considered out of date and disrespectful by many trans people).

For people who have grown up in the dominant US culture—even if it wasn’t the only culture we grew up in—some aspects of this gender system are so pervasive that they seem natural and inevitable. And yet, they don’t reflect the diversity of gender experiences that people have. So it’s important to dig into what gender isn’t:

Gender isn’t binary, although most of us have been taught to think of it that way. Binary simply means that something has only two categories, like on/off or yes/no. The binary gender system is the way of thinking that says there are exactly two kinds of people in the world—men and women. It assumes that there are no categories or experiences of gender beyond men and women—no one who’s both, neither, on a spectrum between, or something else entirely—and that which category you belong to says everything anyone needs to know about your gender.

**Binary Gender System:** The set of ideas and structures that assume and reinforce a two-category system of gender (men/women).

In addition to a way of thinking, the binary gender system also includes concrete structures that sort and confine people into gender categories. M/F check boxes, public restrooms labeled for men and women, and sex-segregated shelters, jails and hospital wards all are part of the binary gender system. Even if we personally don’t believe in the ideas behind the binary gender system, these structures can still have a significant impact on our lives.
The genderbread cookie is an image that many educators and activists use to communicate key concepts related to gender. The earliest version I have found or heard of was developed by youth leaders at the Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center in Portland, OR, around 1997. In 1998, activists with the Trans Activist Network in Western Massachusetts (later the Western Massachusetts chapter of the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition, MTPC) printed a version of it in a training guide; this was cited in the first published version, in a chapter in Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice, 2nd edition, in 2007. The genderbread cookie was always meant to be shared and adapted freely by educators and activists who use it, and this has continued to happen. There are many versions in circulation, with different strengths and weaknesses. However, one user—the proprietor of the website itspronouncedmetrosexual.com—falsely claimed to have authored it, effectively plagiarizing and privatizing what should be an evolving community resource. And his version isn’t even that good, in that it still relies pretty heavily on binary logic. Please don’t use it, and don’t credit him with inventing the genderbread! The version presented here is my current adaptation, based on what works well with training groups I work with. Anyone is free to use and adapt it, crediting me as the author of this version (not of the whole idea).

The binary gender system lumps together several different aspects of human experience: biological sex, assigned sex, gender identity, and gender expression. Actually, these are all different from each other—and none of them are binary.

*Biological sex* refers to features of one’s body including genitals, internal reproductive organs, chromosomes, and hormone levels, along with secondary sex characteristics like body hair, facial hair, fat-to-muscle ratio, breast development and vocal pitch. Even at a biological level, sex is not binary.

*Intersex* people are people whose bodies are not easily categorized as simply male or female. Sometimes this is apparent at birth, and other times not until puberty. There are many different reasons a person’s body might be difficult to categorize, ranging from unusual chromosomes (e.g. rather than XX or XY, people can have XXY, XXX, XO, or a mixture of different sex chromosomes in different cells), to hormone levels that differ from population averages, to genital anatomy that doesn’t look like what we’re used to.

**INTERSEX:** Describes people whose bodies are not easily categorized as simply male or female.

Depending on how you count, anywhere from one in 2000 to one in 60 people are intersex. In some cases, the features that make a body hard to categorize also cause health problems, but in most cases they do not, and the only “problem” is the difficulty that other people have in categorizing the person. Intersex people often face significant stigma and mistreatment in the medical system. For example, until recently it was standard practice to operate on intersex babies’ genitals to make them look more “normal,” even though it is rarely medically necessary and often harms the person’s sexual or reproductive functioning. Intersex activists, working through organizations like InterACT, have worked to end unnecessary infant genital surgeries and improve how intersex people are treated in the medical system.

*Intersex* people used to be referred to as *hermaphrodites.* Now this term is seen as inaccurate and offensive. It’s inaccurate...
because in biology, hermaphrodite usually refers to animals that have complete male and female sex organs, such as earthworms. Although some intersex people have both ovarian and testicular tissue, there is no such thing as a human who is a true hermaphrodite in that sense. The term hermaphrodite also refers to a character in Greek mythology—Hermaphroditus, a male god who became physically fused to a female water nymph. Many people find it offensive to refer to real humans as if they are mythical beings. Finally, the word hermaphrodite as a medical diagnosis has a lot of negative baggage because of how it has been used to pathologize and mistreat intersex people. Intersex is a more neutral and respectful term.

Even among people who are not intersex, bodies can have a wide range of male and female sex characteristics. Some people whose bodies are easily categorized as female have tiny breasts or deep voices; some people whose bodies are easily categorized as male have significant breast tissue or barely any facial hair. In fact, the features we associate with maleness and femaleness are partially based on dominant culture stereotypes and beauty norms, which are not only sexist but also racist, ageist, sizeist and more. Take facial hair, for example. When someone whose body is easily categorized as female goes through menopause and grows coarse chin hairs, does that person become less female? Or does it make more sense to just say that this is part of the spectrum of what female can look like? To add another layer of complication, many people of East Asian descent whose bodies are easily categorized as male do not grow much facial hair; while many people from Southwest Asia/North Africa (the "Middle East") whose bodies are easily categorized as female do. This is just part of the range of how maleness and femaleness can show up, and no more or less normal than the dominant culture norms demanding that female bodies be slender, curvy and hairless while male bodies be large, muscular, and hairy.

Rather than two entirely separate categories, it can be useful to think of maleness and femaleness as a collection of spectrums—a spectrum of breast development, another of genital development, another of testosterone levels, another of estrogen levels, another of X and Y chromosomes, etc.—some of which change over the course of one person’s life, and all of which interact in immensely complex ways.

Often when people say biological sex, they actually mean assigned sex (also called sex assigned at birth). Assigned sex is the legal/administrative category—almost always male or female—to which babies are assigned at birth based on the appearance of the external genitals. This category is recorded on our medical record, birth certificate, and social security record, and becomes required information every time we apply for a government-issued ID, request government funding (like food stamps or federal student loans), and when we enroll in school. That categorization as male or female is always a drastic oversimplification of the maleness and/or femaleness of our bodies.

**SEX ASSIGNED AT BIRTH:** The legal/administrative category—almost always male or female—to which babies are assigned at birth based on the appearance of the external genitals.

Gender identity refers to someone’s internal sense of self, as related to gender categories like man, woman, boy, girl, and many others. It too is not binary. Some people identify not as a man or a woman but as both, neither, in between, or beyond the two categories. Some people with nonbinary gender identities find that the language that would describe their genders doesn’t really exist yet, and so new terms have proliferated in the past few decades. Genderqueer, nonbinary, enby (from nb, short for
nonbinary), gender-fluid, and agender are all words coined since 1990 to name different kinds of nonbinary gender identity (and defined in the glossary).

**GENDER IDENTITY**: Refers to someone’s internal sense of self in terms of the gender categories they have access to, like man, woman, boy, girl, and many others.

But nonbinary gender identity is not new. Throughout history many, if not most, cultures have had more than two gender categories. Most cultures have two main gender categories (like men and women), and many have one or more additional categories that are considered unusual, but not abnormal, ways to be. Hijra in South Asia, Fa’aafafine in Samoa, Mahu in Hawaii, Muxe in Oaxacan, and the various Two Spirit traditions in indigenous North America, are all examples of traditional gender categories beyond man and woman. Some of these terms are still in wide use. Other traditions have been obscured or distorted by the violence of colonization and cultural domination, and are being recovered by activists within those communities who identify with the category.

Sometimes, people are tempted to claim a traditional gender category from a culture that’s not part of their heritage. It might feel validating to know that a culture has/had a word for people “like” you, when your own culture and the dominant culture don’t have words for it. But this kind of claiming is a form of cultural appropriation, and many indigenous people find it offensive and harmful to the communities where the terms originate. Kai Minov’s essay on the *Black Girl Dangerous* blog, “Why Non-Natives Appropriating ‘Two-Spirit’ Hurts,” provides a really important perspective on this. For people with nonbinary gender identities, being allies to each other must include understanding and respecting how cultural and historical context, including the context of colonization, make gender traditions and gender experiences specific.

Most people experience their gender identity as relatively stable over the course of their life—more stable than, say, their hobbies or their fashion sense. Some people experience their gender identity as shifting one or more times. This is different than when someone’s gender stays the same, but the words they use for it change. For example, if you talk with two people who went from identifying as young men to identifying as nonbinary, one might tell you they were always nonbinary and didn’t have words for it, while the other might tell you they were a young man, until they weren’t: their experience of their gender changed. Still other people experience their gender identity as continually shifting from day to day, and might describe themselves as gender-fluid.

**GENDER-FLUID**: Describes someone whose gender identity (not only expression) might change from day to day.

The binary gender system teaches us to assume that biological sex and gender identity always line up in particular ways—for example, that everyone born with a vulva identifies as a woman, and no one born with a penis does. While it’s true that most people born with a vulva grow up to identify as a woman, some grow up to identify as a man or as nonbinary, and of course the same is true of those born with a penis, and of intersex people born with genitals that are hard to categorize. When someone’s gender identity does not line up with their body in the ways demanded by the binary gender system, they might be described as transgender (or trans)—meaning someone whose gender identity differs from what is expected of them in their culture and /or the dominant culture, and who usually has some sort of transition experience of going from living as one gender to living as another gender.
marginalization that trans people face for being trans.

CISGENDER: Not trans.

Still, cisgender is an imperfect term. One critique of cisgender is that it sets up yet another binary: one is either trans or cis. Actually, gender experiences are sometimes more complicated than that. If you want to explore these ideas further, Finn Enke’s essay “The Education of Little Cis” explores the emergence of cisgender as a concept, from both personal and academic perspectives, as well as some of the gray areas between cis and trans.

Trans is also used in a broader way, referring to anyone whose gender identity or gender expression differs from what’s expected of them. This broad understanding of trans includes many people who would not necessarily identify as trans, such as masculine women and feminine men. That’s pretty complicated, since it’s generally not respectful to call someone a word they wouldn’t call themselves. On the other hand, the broad category of trans has been very useful as a social justice organizing tool, allowing us to talk about the whole range of people who are vulnerable to discrimination based on their gender identity or gender expression.

Since trans and transgender are used in so many different ways, it is really helpful when you use either term to clarify how broadly you mean it for the purpose of that conversation. Likewise when someone else speaks of trans people or transgender people, it’s okay to ask which definition they’re using.

Gender expression refers to behavior that communicates something about gender, whether intentionally or unintentionally. It includes how you walk, how you talk, the words you use to describe yourself (including pronouns like he, she, they, ze and so on) and more. People sometimes describe gender expression as a binary of masculine and feminine, but of course masculinity and femininity are far from binary. There is a range of ways to be masculine and a range of ways to be feminine. Norms of masculinity and femininity are culturally specific and also can vary over time within a culture. What counts as feminine “enough” for, say, a woman in a professional office environment looks vastly different now than it did fifty years ago.

GENDER EXPRESSION: Behavior that communicates something about gender, including clothes, mannerisms, etc.

The binary gender system teaches us to assume that gender expression lines up with gender identity, or should—that all women are (or should be) feminine and all men are (or should be) masculine. Of course, that’s not always true. Some women express themselves primarily through masculinity, and might describe themselves as masculine women or as butch, macha, AG, stud, or a variety of other terms. These women’s gender expression doesn’t necessarily make them not women—woman is a gender identity, and masculine is a gender expression. And, it’s not always that straightforward—for some butch women, butch is about identity as well as expression, and is as much a part of their gender identity as woman. Some other women express themselves through a specifically queer femininity that differs from mainstream expectations of femininity, and might describe themselves as femme. Likewise, some men express themselves primarily through femininity, and might describe themselves as femme, queen, fay, and other terms. Some people use the term gender-nonconforming to describe folks whose gender expression differs from what’s usually expected for people of their gender.

GENDER-NONCONFORMING: Describes people whose gender expression differs from what’s usually expected for people of their gender.
Many of the terms for specific kinds of gender-nonconformity emerge from LGB and queer communities. Gender expression and sexual orientation relate to each other in complex ways, but they are not the same thing. Not every feminine man is gay; not every masculine woman is a lesbian. When we think we can guess someone’s sexual orientation based solely on their gender expression, we will often guess wrong. People of any gender identity and expression—including any kind of trans identity—can have any sexual orientation.

**QUEER**: An umbrella term describing a wide range of people who do not conform to heterosexual and/or gender norms; and, a reclaimed derogatory slur taken as a political term to unite people who are marginalized because of their nonconformance to dominant gender identities and/or heterosexuality.

Because gender expression is behavior, you can observe it—you can see how someone walks, observe how they talk, and so on. But you can very easily misinterpret what someone’s gender expression means to them, especially across cultures. For example, in the dominant white U.S. culture, long hair on a man might be interpreted as part of a feminine gender expression, whereas in some Native American communities, long hair is an expected part of masculine expression.

**SEXUAL ORIENTATION**: Someone’s patterns of romantic and/or sexual attraction, in terms of the gender(s) of people they’re attracted to.

On the other hand, gender identity is not observable. The only way you can know someone’s gender identity is if they tell you.

**Activity: Uncovering Gender Expression Assumptions**
1. Think of a time when you made an assumption or a guess about someone, based on their observable gender expression. It might have been a guess about their sexual orientation, their interests, their skills, or something else.
2. On a piece of paper, draw a line down the middle to make two columns. In one column, write (or draw, if you like) what you actually observed about the person. In the other column, write down what you guessed about them. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBSERVED:</th>
<th>ASSUMED OR GUESSED:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a large person</td>
<td>I assumed the person was a man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with pale, sunburned skin</td>
<td>I interpreted his demeanor as masculine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wearing overalls and a baseball cap</td>
<td>I guessed he might do some kind of outdoor work, maybe carpentry (not office work).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stepped out of a pickup truck</td>
<td>I guessed he might be at the library to repair something there, rather than to get books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the library parking lot</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice that the gender identity of the person, unless they actually told you, goes in the assumed or guessed column—because you can’t observe gender identity!
3. Look at what you’ve written down and ask yourself, what would you have to believe about gender in general for your guesses about this person to make sense? For example, the last guess in the right column above only makes sense if you believe that people who are a certain kind of masculine don’t read much.
4. Now ask yourself what else might be going on, in addition to gender. Is there something about race, class, culture, age, or something else that might have contributed to your assumptions or guesses? In the example above, assumptions about class, race and gender come together in stereotypes of “blue collar” labor.
5. Finally, what other, alternate story could you tell? If your initial assumptions and guesses were wrong, what might have been true instead?

If this book is your first introduction to these topics, this all might seem overwhelming. You might even feel more confused than you did before you started reading. That’s okay! This stuff is far more complicated than how we’re usually taught to think about it. Sometimes confusion is a really good sign that you are beginning to pay attention to the complexity of gender.

The key things to remember from this section are: biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression are different from each other. None of them are binary. All of them can change over time. People can have any combination of them, because they are not necessarily attached to each other in the ways the binary gender system teaches us to expect.

This section has introduced a lot of terms that may be new to some readers. As noted in the introduction, the language we use to talk about gender and trans issues is constantly evolving. People use these terms in a variety of ways, and their usage has changed and will continue to change over time. When referring to an individual’s identity, it’s more important to understand what that person means by the terms they use, rather than to memorize the “standard” definitions.

**Activity: Your Personal Genderbread Cookie**
(This activity can be done solo, but is more fun with a friend.) Although trans people often have to think through our genders in great detail, most cisgender people are never asked to describe their genders beyond a simple check box of M or F. But everyone’s gender experience can be understood in a more nuanced way than that. For cisgender people, exploring your gender in all its nuances is one way to develop a foundation of self-awareness for your allyship.

Draw yourself a Genderbread Cookie like the one on p. 10. Where that cookie says “gender identity,” write (or draw) your gender identity—what identity category or categories feels closest to your inner sense of yourself as a gendered person?
Where that cookie says “biological sex,” write (or draw) about aspects of your physical body that are related to gender and/or reproduction, using whatever words and/or images work for you. Don’t just write “male” or “female,” get specific: What are your salient body parts or characteristics that are part of biological sex?

Where that cookie says “gender expression,” write (or draw) yours: What do you do with your body, behavior, attire, and language that communicates something about gender (whether or not you mean it to)? Do people tend to understand your gender expression the same way you do? If not, what do they get wrong, and what do they tend to see instead?

Write or draw in anything else that feels relevant to you about your gender. Are there culturally-specific, class-specific, or race-specific experiences or understandings that are part of your gender? Is there something about your age or generational moment that places a particular twist on your gender? Is there something about your health or disabilities that affects your experience of your gender (or biological sex)? And anything else that feels important to include.

Finally, if you have been doing the activity with a friend: Share your genderbread cookies with each other. Talk through what you wrote/drew, what it makes you think and feel, and what you want each other to know about your genders.
CHAPTER THREE: Trans Lives

COMING OUT AND TRANSITION

Most trans people have some sort of transition experience—going from living their life as one gender (the one assigned at birth) to living their life as another gender. Transition looks different for everybody, and includes any and all of the personal, social, legal, physical and sometimes spiritual processes that a person goes through in order to live their life as a gender that works for them.

Transition

Ingredients  Directions
1/2
2
1
3 3/4
3
1

There is no right way to transition. People can use all, some or none of the options available to them. And people often don't have access to all of the options they want and need. People make a million complicated decisions about how to transition. There is no magic ingredient that makes a transition "complete."

Some trans people reach a point where they feel their transition is over, and they are "fully transitioned" and no longer transitioning. For others, transition is a lifelong process of exploration and adjustment. For some trans people, a gender transition is something they have to get out of the way in order to continue exploring other aspects of themselves; for others, it's not so separate, and continuing to explore gender is part of continuing to grow as a person. No one else gets to decide when someone's transition is "complete,” and respecting someone's gender shouldn't depend on how complete their transition seems to you or to them.

Ingredients of Transition—Mix and Match!

PERSONAL
- Contemplating your gender and what it means to you
- Noticing feelings you might have been ignoring
- Contemplating what gender categories and labels "feel right”
- Contemplating what it would mean to live publicly as a different gender than you've been seen as up until now

SOCIAL
- Asking people to call you a different name
- Asking people to call you a different pronoun (he, she, they, ze, etc.)
- Some relationships shift as dynamics get re-negotiated, for example shifting from being an uncle to aunt, or a girlfriend to a genderqueer sweetie, or a woman friend to a man friend
- Changing your clothes and hair to styles that feel more aligned with your identity and/or how you want to be seen
You’re like a whole ‘nother person,” she said. “I’ll have to get to know you all over again.” She meant because of my gender. I thought, well of course I’m a whole ‘nother person. It’s been 15 years. I’m a grownup now, for one thing. She’s probably a whole ‘nother person, too.

In some ways, gender transitions are unique. But in other ways, they’re much like any other major life transition. What have been the transitions in your life, whether gender-related or not, that make you feel or seem like “a whole ‘nother person”? And how are you, at the same time, the same person as you always were?

“Coming out,” in this context, simply means disclosing that you’re trans. Like “coming out” around sexual orientation, coming out about gender is usually not a one-time announcement. For some people, their trans identity is private, and coming out is a rare event. Others might come out a dozen times a day. Coming out is not inherently healthy or unhealthy. People decide to be out or not in different contexts for many reasons including to protect their safety. No one should be pressured to come out or not come out.

For some trans people, strangers tend to assume they’re a gender that they’re not, or tend to guess right away that they’re trans. In this situation, coming out means giving people information about the gender they are. Often this happens after someone makes an inaccurate assumption. If someone says, “Excuse me sir, can you help me find the Third Street bus stop?,” coming out can be saying, “Actually I’m a woman, and it’s just past that big brick building over there.”

For other trans people, strangers usually or always assume they’re the gender they are, and do not necessarily assume they are trans or that they used to live as another gender. For trans people in this situation, coming...
out means complicating people’s understanding of their gender. It might sound like telling a colleague, “You know me as a woman, and you might not realize that I didn’t always live as a woman.” Or it might sound like just letting something slip, like a trans man saying, “I love Girl Scout cookie season, too! When I was a Girl Scout...”

A NOTE ABOUT “PASSING”: “Passing” means being seen as belonging unquestionably to a particular group, e.g. being seen as a woman or as a man. Often, it refers to a trans person being seen as the gender they are; occasionally it refers to being seen as the gender that one wants to be seen as at the moment, for safety or other reasons. Some people use “passing” specifically to mean being seen as cisgender (e.g. a trans woman who is assumed by others to be a cisgender woman is “passing”), while for others it is not that specific. Passing is a very complex and problematic concept, not only with regard to trans issues but also in terms of race, class, and other systems of categorization and power.

Because of the widespread discomfort and misunderstanding around trans identities, this kind of coming out can ironically lead people to understand a trans person’s identity less clearly than they did before. For example, if someone is not very familiar with trans identities, knowing that someone is not only a woman but also a trans woman can lead them to doubt her authenticity as a woman. Sometimes people start to have trouble calling someone the right pronouns (she, they, he, etc.) after finding out the person is trans, even though they were getting it right before. If that ever comes up for you, Chapter 4, “Getting Pronouns Right and What It Teaches Us About Gender,” may be helpful.

Coming out as nonbinary is complicated in yet another way. Since the dominant culture doesn’t have a way of understanding nonbinary identity, strangers almost always guess wrong about our genders. When we decide to tell them our identities, they may not recognize the words we use. Coming out as nonbinary often means educating the people around us about nonbinary identities, trans identities more generally, and our particular experiences. It is a huge amount of work, and can be emotionally costly especially when people are not receptive. Many people with nonbinary identities choose not to come out in some contexts, just to make it easier to navigate a social environment that doesn’t quite have a place for us.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Wrapping your mind around the concepts and terminology used to talk about trans identities is important, but of course trans people’s lives are more than our genders. For one thing, trans people are not only trans, but
also all of our other identities at the same time. They all matter, and they all complicate each other. Legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw first coined the term intersectionality to talk about how racism and sexism interact to create specific impacts on Black women that are more complicated than just the sum of racism as experienced by Black men and sexism as experienced by white women. Since then, other scholars and activists have further developed the concept to talk about how all kinds of identities are entangled with each other, as well as how systems like racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and so on are entangled and reinforce each other.

Intersectionality reminds us that the experience of being, for example, a trans woman who is Latina, cannot be understood simply as experiencing everything typical of trans women across races plus everything typical of Latinas whether trans or not—even if such generalizations could be made. Being Latina (and all the specificity of what kind of Latina, including stuff like nationality, immigration status, first language, etc.) impacts what it may mean for someone to experience herself as a trans woman, and being a trans woman impacts how she might understand her Latina-ness. Translatin@ emerges as its own thing—a very specific position from which someone experiences herself and the world, not as simple as the sum of trans and woman and Latina.

These intersections of identity affect the kinds of barriers trans people are likely to face in the world in some ways that are subtle, and other ways that are horribly blatant. For example, many white trans men (as well as transmasculine people who do not identify as men) have written about their experiences of gaining privilege when they started being perceived as men. (I get much better customer service in hardware stores when I’m perceived as a man, even a small and feminine man, than when I’m perceived as a woman.) But for trans men who are Black and/or Latino, being perceived as a man can make them vulnerable to unfriendly attention from police and security guards, differently than when they were perceived as women. They may also gain privilege in some contexts, but the two don’t cancel each other out.

**Transmasculine (adj.):** Usually used to describe trans people who are assigned female at birth and whose identity is more toward man than woman, including transgender men as well as some people with nonbinary gender identities. The term is imperfect in many ways—see the Glossary for a deeper explanation of its uses and complications.

**Reflection: Intersectionality**
How are your other identities intertwined with your gender?
play is also common among teens in environments where it is accepted. Beyond play, some kids may have gender expression that’s consistently different from what adults expect of them—masculine boys, feminine girls, and so on.

It is not always immediately obvious to adults whether a particular child is trans, in the sense that they will need to transition, or gender-nonconforming, or engaging in gender play. Fortunately, it is not necessary to know. Rather than trying to figure out what a child is, parents, teachers and service providers can focus on what a child needs, and trust that the rest will become clear with time. In order to acknowledge the experiences of kids whose gender stands out, without boxing them in to any assumption about how they will eventually identify, people sometimes refer to such kids as gender-creative, gender-expansive, or gender-independent.

Some trans children and youth choose to go through a social transition. Social transition means participating in family, school and other activities in accordance with the child’s gender identity, rather than the assigned gender. It includes introducing the child to peers and adults using a name, pronouns, etc. that are appropriate for the child’s stated gender.

Support from family and schools is crucial for social transition. However, the support should always follow the child’s lead. Since more children are transitioning in a relatively public way, some people have become concerned that parents, over-eager to be supportive, are pushing their kids into a gender transition that may not be necessary—“making” them trans, in other words. Let’s clear this up: You can’t “make” a kid trans, any more than you can make a trans kid cis. Gender identity at all ages is pretty resistant to outside pressure to change. And the reality of many parents pressuring their kids to not be trans is a far more widespread and dangerous pattern than the reverse.
Still, it is important to remember that not every gender-expansive kid will want or need to transition. For example, if a nine-year-old who has been raised as a girl announces out of the blue, “I’m not a girl, and I want to be called Joey instead of Jolene,” the family should not rush to change Joey’s legal name and buy a whole set of school clothes from the boys’ department. Joey may eventually need that kind of transition, or may not. Joey may be a trans boy, or perhaps a gender-nonconforming girl or tomboy, or maybe Joey will have a nonbinary gender identity. Even if Joey is a trans boy, he might be a feminine boy who enjoys wearing girls’ clothes some or all of the time. We don’t know yet, and it doesn’t necessarily matter. Adults can support Joey by respecting what Joey wants right now, asking open-ended, nonjudgmental questions about what that means to Joey, and seeking support for themselves to manage their own expectations and wishes for Joey’s gender.

In terms of medical transition, no medical steps are necessary or available before puberty. As trans children approach puberty, some will consider puberty blocking medications, which delay puberty until the child and family can make decisions about further medical transition steps. These are completely reversible. After age 16 (or sometimes a little before), some trans youth with supportive parents begin hormone therapies to induce pubertal changes consistent with their gender identity. These treatments are considered partially reversible. After age 18 (or in rare cases, 16) trans youth can consider surgical interventions.
If you’re a parent of a trans kid (who’s still a kid), it’s especially important to get support for yourself as you support your child. All kinds of reactions are common and normal for parents of trans kids and kids exploring their gender. We live in a strictly binary culture, and it can take time to understand and accept something new. Getting the support you need will enable you to support your child well. Your local PFLAG group or LGBTQ Center may have resources or support groups specifically for parents of trans kids, and there are lots of online resources including Gender Spectrum, PFLAG, and various social media groups. And make sure to check out the section for parents of trans kids on pp. 83–85.

Although many families with trans kids benefit from working with a gender therapist, a therapist’s diagnosis is not required to confirm that a child is trans—the child’s own articulation of their identity is enough. A therapist’s role with a trans kid often includes supporting the child and family in making decisions about social transition, assisting the parents and school to respect the child’s identity, and facilitating access to medical transition as appropriate.

Like with adults, it’s important to remember that trans kids are more than their genders. Trans children and youth are, above all, children and youth. They are playful and serious, artists and jocks, valedictorians and class clowns. They test boundaries, throw tantrums, laugh at fart jokes, and dazzle us with their brilliance. Being trans is one important aspect of their identity and experience; it does not define them.

DISCRIMINATION, VIOLENCE, AND DISRESPECT

Trans people face daily hurdles ranging from verbal and physical violence, to the repeated indignity of stares and insults, to the challenge of navigating systems that aren’t designed to account for people like us. The 2015 US Trans Survey, conducted by the National Transgender Political Coalition, surveyed over 27 thousand trans people and found:

- About 10% had experienced violence from a family member in reaction to their gender.
- Almost 20% left a faith community due to rejection of their gender.
- Only 11% had been able to change all their identity documents to reflect their gender, and of those who had shown an id that didn’t match their current gender, a third were harassed, assaulted, or denied services as a result.
- Almost a quarter had lost a job opportunity in the past year because of their gender.
- More than three quarters of those who were out or perceived as trans while in K–12 schools had experienced some form of mistreatment there, including physical and sexual violence, name calling, and being denied access to restrooms.
- More than half of those who interacted with police officers who recognized them as trans experienced some form of mistreatment, and police officers frequently assumed that trans people—especially trans women of color—were doing sex work when they weren’t.

The rates of violence and discrimination are magnified when they intersect with racism, classism, ableism, ageism and so on. Trans people who have done sex work for income are even more likely to report
experiencing violence from friends, strangers and the police than other trans people. Trans children face even greater barriers in accessing healthcare than trans adults, especially if their families are not supportive. Trans people of color and trans immigrants face particular barriers in obtaining safe and stable employment, and are especially susceptible to violence from police.

Sometimes discrimination and mistreatment are obvious: A landlord offers someone an apartment, and then changes their mind when they realize the new tenant is trans. A classmate verbally denies a trans woman’s identity by saying something like, “everyone knows you’re not a real woman,” and deliberately calls her “him” to drive home the point. A stranger assaults a trans person because they know they can get away with it—trans people have good reason not to go to the police for help, and those who assault trans people are rarely apprehended, much less convicted.

Other times, there may be no ill intent, but the simple fact of systems set up on a binary assumption leads to exclusion of trans people. A homeless shelter intake worker turns a trans person away because they can’t figure out whether to send the person to the men’s shelter or the women’s shelter. A school holds separate gym classes for boys and girls, and a nonbinary trans kid is assigned by default to the group that matches their sex assigned at birth. My health insurance company refuses to give me information about my own account over the phone, because they perceive my voice as female and therefore don’t believe I’m me.

Part of being an ally to trans individuals is listening for and understanding what real or potential barriers are coming up in their lives, and figuring out what you can do to help diminish those barriers—on an individual level, on an organizational level, or as an activist working for broader change.

MISPRONOUNING: Calling someone the wrong pronoun, whether intentionally or unintentionally. For example, calling someone he when she wants to be referred to as she.

Sometimes, even before that, we need to make sure we are not being one of those barriers, even unintentionally. This means developing the capacity to notice and correct when we might say something that unintentionally discredits a trans person’s identity, or worse yet places them in danger. The next section takes a deeper dive into the specific skill of making sure you can always call people the pronouns they want to be called, including when their pronoun changes. At the same time, it uses pronouns and mispronouning as a window into some of the ways in which we might internalize assumptions of the binary gender system.