DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Using a Person's Correct Pronouns Saves Lives

PRONOUNS ARE A KEY TO SUICIDE PREVENTION

An important part of creating a supportive environment for transgender and nonbinary youth is understanding – and using appropriately – the terms they use to describe themselves.

Why do pronouns matter?

Pronouns are any word that replaces a noun, such as I, you, and they. Some pronouns are tied to a specific gender, such as she or he. Pronouns allow us to refer to someone without using a name. We use pronouns all the time. People often use a pronoun that relates to their gender identity. Pronouns are common parts of speech that can seem unimportant to some but mean the world to others. Using a person's correct pronouns can even save lives. Using the correct pronouns shows that we respect and support that person and that we care about their identity.

You can't always know someone's preferred pronouns just by looking at the person and making assumptions can make people feel unsafe and unwelcome. Feeling a sense of belonging is a key protective factor for strong mental health and suicide prevention. By asking about pronouns you can show people in the LGBTQIA+/2S that you care and that they belong.

Did you know that using correct pronouns creates a safer environment?

According to the 2019 Minnesota Student Survey, there are LGBTQIA+/2S youth living in every county in Minnesota. You most likely encounter or know people who are part of the LGBTQIA+/2S community without realizing it. LGBTQIA+/2S youth in Minnesota are much more likely to experience depression and anxiety and consider suicide than their peers.

- 42% of LGBTQIA+/2S youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, including more than half of transgender and nonbinary youth.

- Transgender and nonbinary youth who reported having pronouns respected by all the people they lived with attempted suicide at half the rate of those who did not have their pronouns respected by anyone with whom they lived.

- Transgender and nonbinary youth who were able to change their name and/or gender marker on legal documents, such as driver's licenses and birth certificates, reported lower rates of attempting suicide.

- LGBTQIA+/2S youth who had access to spaces that affirmed their sexual orientation and gender identity reported lower of attempting suicide. (Trevor Project's 2021 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health)

Respecting a person's pronouns is one way to provide a protective, inclusive space, promote well-being and reduce their risk of suicide by helping them feel like they belong.

How do I ask about pronouns?

Asking someone what pronouns they use is a simple way to learn the most respectful and correct way to refer to them. You can help make any space feel more inclusive by leading with your own pronouns.

You can ask someone what pronouns they use. Some examples:

"What pronouns do you use?" or "What pronouns can I use to refer to you?"

You can also propose that people share their pronouns while introducing themselves in a group setting and then model for the group how to respond. Include pronouns as part of introductions. Consider something like the script below:

"As we introduce ourselves, if you would like, please share how you would prefer others in the room to refer to you. This could include your pronouns, such as he, she, or they, or it could be that you prefer people in the room to refer to you by your last name, Ms. or Dr. so-and-so. This is important because we want to create a respectful space for everyone and we don't want to make assumptions about each other. I'll go first. My name is Katie, I work at…., you can refer to me as she/her or just Katie is fine."

Let's highlight a few important parts of this example. Notice that we said, **"if you like."** While it's important to give people the option to share pronouns and introduce the idea, it's equally important that sharing pronouns is optional. Making pronoun sharing mandatory may inadvertently force someone to out themselves as being transgender or nonbinary when they were not ready to do so. Notice also that we gave the examples of **"he, she, or they."** While there are other pronouns as well that people might prefer, explicitly including "they" as an example of how to refer to a single person helps normalize its use. Lastly, broadening an introduction to include other ways that people want to be referred to, such as their last name, makes the space welcoming and inclusive in ways beyond pronouns.

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

Pronouns can be deeply personal and important, regardless of which pronouns people 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. Simply answer their question by sharing your pronouns.

Remember, you cannot "tell" what pronouns people use just by looking at a person. We can help keep LGBTQIA+/2S people safer by not making assumptions. Asking and answering questions about pronouns provides everyone with the knowledge and skills to treat each other with respect.

What if I make a mistake?

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. Whoever you're talking to will most likely appreciate the effort. Mistakes can be a part of the learning process. Here are some tips for when those mistakes happen:

- **Don't make the mistake a big deal.** If you misgender someone, simply apologize, thank them for correcting you, and move on.

- **Use your mistakes as learning opportunities.** Mistakes are a great opportunity to educate others who may not be informed.

- **Hold yourself accountable.** Continue to educate yourself on this topic and commit to making a more conscious effort in the future. If you find yourself making the same mistakes with someone's pronouns, try giving that person three compliments in your head for each mistake you make using their correct pronoun. Over time, you might find yourself making fewer and fewer mistakes.

What if I don't understand someone else's pronouns?

You do not need to understand someone else's pronouns or make judgments about them in order to respect them as a person. No one owes anyone else an explanation about their pronouns and why they've chosen them. Be patient and demonstrate support in trying, and eventually you'll get it right consistently.

When you use someone's correct pronouns, it creates an inclusive environment where you demonstrate that you care for and respect them. Just as we wouldn't want to make up a nickname for someone and use it against their will, it can be just as upsetting or disrespectful to refer to someone using incorrect pronouns. Actively choosing to not use the pronouns someone has shared that they go by is harassment and implies that intersex, transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people do not or should not exist.

To learn more about why pronouns matter and find additional resources, visit Pronouns.org (http:/www.pronouns.org).

Other ways to create affirming spaces for transgender and nonbinary people

Asking about pronouns is a great way to start. Consider the following ideas as well for creating safer spaces for transgender and nonbinary people:

- **Review intake forms**. Add questions to included "preferred name" and "pronoun."

- **Review single stall, non-gendered bathroom availability**. Are single bathrooms that are not gender specific available?

- **Review organizational policies** or forms to see where they can be more inclusive and expansive with pronouns in written messaging.

▪ **Use images, signs, or marketing materials** that demonstrate all genders are welcome.

For additional resources about creating safe community spaces and parenting transgender or nonbinary youth, see OutFront Minnesota (www.outfront.org/educationalequity) or GLAAD (www.glaad.org/transgender/resources).

The difference between sex and gender

Gender describes our internal understanding and experience of our own gender identity. Each person's experience of their gender identity is unique and personal and cannot be known simply by looking at a person. Gender is different from 'sex'.

Sex: Sex is a label — male, female, or intersex — that you're assigned by a doctor at birth based on the external genitals you're born with. It does not necessarily match someone's gender.

Gender: Gender is complex. It is an internal and psychological sense of who you are as a gendered being. It's a social and legal status, and set of expectations from society, about behaviors, characteristics, and thoughts centering around notions of "masculinity," "femininity," and "androgyny," including aspects of identity and expression.

Common genders include:

Cisgender: Cis is an adjective that means "identifies as their sex assigned at birth" derived from the Latin word meaning "on the same side."

Transgender: Trans is an adjective for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Many transgender people will transition to align their gender expression with their gender identity; however, you do not have to transition to be transgender.

Nonbinary: Nonbinary people experience their gender identity as outside of the male-female gender binary. Not all nonbinary people identify as transgender and not all transgender people identify as nonbinary. Sometimes (and increasingly), nonbinary can be used to describe the aesthetic, presentation or expression of a cis gender or transgender person.

Two-Spirit: Two-Spirit (2S) is an umbrella term created by First Nations/Native American/Indigenous peoples to describe people who have both a male and female spirit within them and are blessed by their Creator to see life through the eyes of both genders. This term should not be appropriated to describe people who are not First Nations/Native American/Indigenous members. Different tribes may have their own unique language or set of identity labels.

Genderqueer: Genderqueer is a term used by some who choose to create their own "gender box" rather than fit into the specifications of another gender label. While some people regard "queer" as offensive, others embrace it.

Words are powerful expressions of identity. LGBTQIA+/2S youth may use a variety of terms to represent themselves and their experiences. These terms may be confusing for parents and relatives. To help clarify, see the glossary at LGBTQ Terminology (https://outandequal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/LGBTQ-Terminology-2019.pdf).

Minnesota Department of Health
Mental Health and Well-being Committee of the Minnesota Suicide Prevention Taskforce
https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/suicide/index.html

To obtain this information in a different format, call: 651-201-5400.

06/02/22