

National Resource Center
on LGBTQ+ Aging
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c/o Services & Advocacy
for GLBT Elders (SAGE)
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What are gender pronouns?

Gender pronouns are words that indicate a person's gender like "she, her, hers", "he, him, his", "they, them, theirs", or other pronouns. Everyone has gender pronouns, but this often goes unnoticed for people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Transgender and non-binary older adults are those that identify as a different gender than the one they were assigned at birth, and they might choose to change their gender pronouns when they transition away from their birth assigned gender.

Why are gender pronouns important?

Gender pronouns indicate something about someone's personal identity, and respecting personal identity is important in making people feel welcome, heard, and understood. Respecting the gender pronouns of transgender and nonbinary older adults is an important step in making them feel included and safe in your agency. Using the right gender pronouns for someone is as important as using the right name. When providing services to someone new, it is best to ask their name along with their gender pronouns.

How do I ask someone about their pronouns?

Asking about gender pronouns is simple and fast, and you should ask when you first meet someone. Here are some examples of easy ways to ask for pronouns:

- What pronouns should I use to refer to you?
- What pronouns do you use?
- My pronouns are "she, her, hers". What are yours?

What if it is awkward to ask someone their pronouns?

Older adults might not understand why you are asking about their gender pronouns, and they might be confused, irritated, or amused that you are asking. While it might be awkward to ask many older adults what their pronouns are, it goes a long way towards making LGBTQ+ older adults feel welcomed and accepted in your agency. Not only are you making LGBTQ+ older adults feel welcomed by asking for pronouns, but you are modeling welcoming behavior for non-LGBTQ+ older adults that receive services from your agency as well.

Best practices:

Listen: Pronouns are personal and listening to the individual is the most important step in getting gender pronouns right. Sometimes, people may use more than one gender pronoun, or none at all. It is essential to listen without judgement to understand the gender pronouns a person uses and wants you to use.

Share Your Pronouns: Making pronouns a part of your agency's culture is a way to make transgender and nonbinary older adults feel comfortable sharing their own pronouns if they wish. Include your pronouns when you introduce yourself and include your pronouns in your email signature.

Always ask, never assume: It is best not to assume that you know someone's gender pronouns without asking first. When meeting someone new or performing an intake, you can ask for their pronouns. When asking, emphasize that it is optional to share gender pronouns and be sure to ask about pronouns in a private way or allow space for pronouns to be written by the patient on intake forms.

Use Gender Neutral Language: Use gender neutral pronouns when you do not know what gender pronouns someone uses. This is important not only when speaking about transgender and nonbinary older adults but also when asking about emergency contacts, spouses or partners, and support systems. For example, you can say "theirs" instead of "his or hers". Use gender neutral terms when referring to a group to make everyone feel welcome. You can say "Hi everyone", "Hi all", or "Hi folks" instead of saying "Hi guys" or "Hi ladies".

- Example: They have been a patient here for 10 years.
- Example: Do you have a partner or significant other that you would like to put as an emergency contact?

Practice, Practice, Practice: Make sure that you do your best to always ask the gender pronouns of those receiving services from your agency and use those pronouns even when the person is not present. Sometimes it might be difficult to use the right pronouns, but repetition will make it easier.

Mistakes Happen: If you make a mistake and refer to someone using the wrong pronouns, it is best to apologize, tell them you will work to be better, and to move on. Though it can be an uncomfortable situation, profusely apologizing can make the person you are speaking with uncomfortable or feel burdened with your mistake.

Resources

If you want to read more about gender pronouns, these sources are a good place to start.

[Straight for Equality | What's this? Personal Pronouns](#)

[GLSEN | Pronoun Guide](#)

[LGBT Life Center | Understanding Pronouns](#)

[GLAAD | Tips for Allies of Transgender People](#)

The NRC is grateful to Morgan Van Vleck for sharing these suggestions and tips for using gender pronouns. Morgan Van Vleck is an MSW intern for the NRC, who is passionate about advocating for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ older adults in aging services.