CENTER of EXCELLENCE
LGBTQ+ BEHAVIORAL HEALTH EQUITY

Language Guidance When Serving LGBTQ+ Populations

The Center of Excellence on LGBTQ+ Behavioral Health Equity (CoE LGBTQ+ BHE) has created this language guidance related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) as a resource for behavioral health practitioners to better understand the most recent language used in LGBTQ+ communities. This list is not exhaustive, and we encourage professionals to gain a broader foundation on this knowledge by watching our foundational webinars **Sexual Orientation & Behavioral Health 101 and Gender Identity, Expression & Behavioral Health 101**, available at: https://lgbtqequity.org/learn/. It should be noted that people use language in different ways, and the best practice is always to honor language an individual uses to identify themselves.

Updated Language	Outdated Language	Why It Matters
Transgender man or trans man, transgender woman or trans woman, transgender boy or trans boy, transgender girl or trans girl	**Transgender male or transgender female**	When asking questions about gender, use "man," "boy," and "woman" or "girl" over "male" and "female" because male and female are typically used to describe sex assigned at birth.
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Queer, Straight, etc.	**Heterosexual or Homosexual**	The term homosexual has a history of medicalization and has been used often as a derogatory term. As such, extend the same recommendation towards "heterosexual."
Bisexual defined as attraction to more than one gender	**Bisexual being defined as an attraction to "both men and women"**	The outdated language incorrectly assumes that there are only two genders, when there are multiple genders. The best practice definition acknowledges that a Bi+ person may be attracted to more than one gender at a time, though not necessarily at the same time or in the same way.
Sexual orientation or gender identity	**Lifestyle, choice, or preference**	When referring to pronouns or identity, never use the word preference, lifestyle, or choice. It is dismissive to the lived experience of people who identify as LGBTQ+.

Updated Language	Outdated Language	Why It Matters
Pronouns, correct pronouns, or proper pronouns, name, correct name	**Preferred pronouns, preferred name**	A person's name and pronouns are their name and pronouns, not simply a preference. Using someone's correct name and pronouns is a simple way to show respect. If you are unsure of someone's pronouns, use gender neutral pronouns such as they, them, theirs until they confirm what their pronouns are. Practicing this with all people regardless of their gender expression will help you avoid making assumptions about someone's identity.
Using transgender exclusively as an adjective	**Using transgender as a verb (transgendered, transgendering) or noun (a transgender)**	The term transgender is an adjective and should be used as transgender person, transgender pride flag, transgender community, etc.
A person identifies as transgender. You can also say they identify as a man, a woman, or nonbinary.	**A person used to be man or woman, a person was born a boy or girl.**	Never say someone "used to be" another gender or was "born" another gender. Someone's gender identity is valid from the moment they disclose it to you, regardless of whether you previously knew them by a different name or pronouns.
Some tribal communities may use the term Two-Spirit.	**Tribal communities use the term Two-Spirit.**	Most indigenous communities had or have their own dialects with unique words to describe all of their recognized sexual orientations and gender identities. Some native languages were exterminated through colonization and "two-spirit" became a new word that some communities adopted to describe people who fall out of the expected gender and sexuality norms. It is not accepted by all indigenous communities.
Another gender, another sex	**Opposite sex, opposite gender**	The word "opposite" implies there are only two genders or two sexes and does not acknowledge the existence of nonbinary or intersex individuals.

Updated Language	Outdated Language	Why It Matters
Rejecting or affirming behaviors	**Rejecting or affirming families**	The outdated language stigmatizes families by characterizing them as wholly accepting or wholly rejecting, when in fact, many families move across a spectrum of showing accepting and rejecting behaviors. Additionally, families may be struggling to learn what is supportive to their LGBTQ+ child. Family support is incredibly beneficial to LGBTQ+ young people, so language should focus on changing the behaviors, not the family. Also note that speaking about family in the LGBTQ+ community might also include "chosen family," which is a term used to describe family that may not be biologically or legally tied to the person, but plays an important family role in their lives.
Transgender	**Transsexual**	An older term; still used by some people who have changed or seek to change their bodies through medical interventions. Many transgender people do not identify as transsexual and use the word transgender or trans. It is always best practice to ask how someone identifies and to use the term they request.
Gender affirming surgery	**Sex change, sex reassignment surgery, gender reassignment surgery**	Here, the word "sex" is a stand-in for the word "gender," but gender doesn't change when someone undergoes an operation. Because they already identify as said gender, these surgeries instead affirm their gender.
They/Them/Theirs	**Gendered language in written materials (e.g., policies & brochures) which have references to "he or she," "she/he," or "(s)he"**	Using "he or she" or another variation implies these are the only two pronouns people use and does not acknowledge the existence of people who use any other pronouns. It is appropriate to instead use singular "they." For example, instead of saying "the client is best suited to tell you about his or her needs," just write "the client is best suited to tell you about their needs."

Funding for the Center of Excellence on LBGTQ+ Behavioral Health Equity was made possible by Grant No. 1 H79 FG000583-01 from SAMHSA of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, SAMHSA/HHS, or the U.S. Government.