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# Pronoun and Language Guidelines for Trans-Affirming Workplaces in the Mental Health and Addictions Sector

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## About this Guide

We work and live alongside trans people. They are our co-workers, partners, clients, and community members. More than 100,000 Canadians identified as [transgender](#) or [nonbinary](#) in the 2021 census, the first time the country's census asked people to provide their [gender](#).<sup>1</sup> Among Canadians age 20 to 24, almost 1 in 100 identified as transgender or nonbinary.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this document is to help you create a safer and more inclusive space for trans people. You will learn the current terminology, why you should consider people's overlapping identities, current pronouns, how to use gender-inclusive language (that is, language that doesn't discriminate against a particular gender or gender identity), and what to do if you make a mistake and use the wrong pronoun.

We developed this guide for organizations in the mental health and substance use sector in Ontario, although much of the advice is applicable more broadly. The content is based on the findings from an environmental scan of resources that provide advice and education on language use in trans-affirming spaces as well as the lived experience of the guide's authors.

The recommendations in this guide are simple to apply for individuals working in a mental health and substance use services setting. However, leaders also need to consider their organization's language use, policies, and practices in the specific context of service delivery, which is beyond the scope of this guide. For more guidance on this important topic see [LGBTQ2S Inclusion Playbook: A Series of Best Practices for Healthcare Environments](#).<sup>2</sup>

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## Terminology (Trans 101)

**2S/LGBTQIA+** is an acronym that stands for "2 spirit (sometimes called two spirit, two spirited, or 2 spirited), lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual. The plus sign indicates additional identities that may not be

specifically included in the acronym but which are also part of the community. The 2S is first and is bracketed off to recognize that two-spirit people, who predate LGBTQIA+ communities on Turtle Island (North America) have culturally distinct ways of understanding gender and sexuality that precede colonial understandings. Although the 2S/LGBTQIA+ acronym is used as shorthand to bring together the shared interests of 2S/LGBTQIA+ people, it is important to remember there is enormous diversity of experience, identity, and perspective within this community, and more specific language should be used whenever possible (eg, if the topic is about trans people's healthcare experiences, say *trans* people, not *2S/LGBTQIA+* people).

**Gender** refers to the norms, behaviours, and roles associated with being a man, a woman, or another gender identity.

**Sex** refers to the classification of a person on the basis of their reproductive organs, hormones, chromosomes, and other physical characteristics into male, female, or intersex.

**Assigned gender at birth** refers to sex/gender assigned at birth, typically based on a person's genitals.

**Intersex** is a term used to describe a person with a reproductive system, chromosomes and/or hormones that are not easily categorized into the male/female binary. Intersex characteristics occur in 1 out of every 1,500 births. Typically intersex people are assigned male or female at birth. Intersex people may or may not identify as trans or transgender.

**Trans** is an umbrella term that captures the varied and complex ways that people identify with a gender that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. *Trans* refers to a person's gender, not their sexual orientation or behaviours. The word *trans* is a short form for *transgender*; however, some members of the trans community use *transgender* to describe binary trans people (trans men and trans women) and the term *trans* as an umbrella term to encompass the broader community of binary and nonbinary trans people.<sup>3</sup> Trans people may or may not seek medical support to align their bodies with their gender identity.

**Trans men** refers to men who were assigned female at birth (AFAB). They often have a masculine name and appearance.

**Trans women** refers to women who were assigned male at birth (AMAB). They often have a feminine name and appearance.

**Nonbinary** refers to people whose genders fall in-between or outside the gender binary (the categories of men and women). Nonbinary people may have a masculine, feminine, or androgynous appearance. Many nonbinary people identify as trans, but some do not.

**Misgendering** refers to addressing somebody using pronouns or other language that doesn't correspond with that person's gender identity.

**Gender diverse/gender nonconforming/gender expansive** are broader terms than trans and include people whose self-identification, appearance, and/or self-expression challenges society's expectations around sex and gender. Not all gender expansive people use the word trans to describe themselves.

**Two-Spirit** is a contemporary term used by many Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island (North America) that describes a range of gender, sexual and/or spiritual identities.<sup>4,5</sup>

**Cisgender** or **cis** is a term that describes people whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.<sup>3</sup>

**Neopronouns** are personal pronouns other than he/him/his, she/her/hers, or they/them/theirs. Some examples include: xe/xem/xyr, ze/hir/hirs, and fae/faer/faers.

**Cissexism** refers to the assumption that everyone is cisgender by default and that being cisgender is more natural and legitimate than being trans. Cissexism results in systemic discrimination against trans people and disproportionately affects trans women and trans feminine people.<sup>6,7</sup>

**Transphobia** describes negative beliefs about, attitudes towards, fear of, and/or aversion to trans people, which are used to justify discrimination, harassment, and/or violence against trans people.<sup>3</sup>

**Intersectionality** describes the interconnection between and interdependency of different systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, and classism. Kimberlé Crenshaw first coined the term to describe how her experience of being a Black woman cannot be understood as two separate experiences of race and sex.<sup>8</sup> Instead, according to Crenshaw, we must focus on the interactions between the two, and the ways in which racism and sexism compound each other, leading to greater oppression.<sup>9</sup>

**Intersecting identities** refers to the way that different aspects of someone's identity (eg, their cultural background, gender identity, sexual orientation, and social class) work together to shape someone's sense of self and thus cannot easily be separated into parts.



## Why Does Gender Inclusive Language Matter in a Mental Health and Addictions Setting?

According to a 2023 poll, more than half of Canadians believe a person can only be male or female.<sup>8</sup> In addition, 6 in 10 were against the use of gender-inclusive language and 6 in 10 felt people should not include their pronouns in email signatures and social media profiles.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, the same poll showed that 7 in 10 Canadians feel transgender people face significant discrimination and 6 in 10 feel that increasing acceptance of trans people is a sign of social progress.<sup>10</sup> The discrimination that Canadians understand trans people experience is directly linked to their hesitancy to change the language they use.

Research over the past 20 years has shown that trans and nonbinary people — and youth in particular — are at a high risk of having mental health-related symptoms or conditions, such as depression, substance misuse, and thoughts of suicide. However, when trans youth are supported by family, friends, and health care providers, this increased risk disappears.<sup>11</sup>

It is not being trans that increases the risk to a person's mental health and well-being — it is cissexism and transphobia. Pronouns are an important part of how people identify themselves. When people use the wrong pronouns, even if unintentionally, it can cause the trans person to feel anxiety, lower self-esteem, and embarrassment.<sup>12</sup> It can even place a trans person in physical danger by disclosing their trans identity to others, because transgender people are at risk of transphobic violence and safety can depend on not disclosing trans identity.<sup>13</sup> Repeated [misgendering](#) can also be a form of harassment, according to the Ontario Human Rights Code.<sup>14</sup>

A simple way to support a trans person is to use their chosen name and pronouns. But changing the language we use is only one essential first step in making our spaces more inclusive for our trans colleagues and clients. For individual efforts to be effective in shaping a trans-affirming workplace, they

must be supported by shifts in practice and policy at the institutional and system levels.

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## Intersectionality

Intersecting identities and experiences (such as disability, race, Indigeneity, age, body size, cultural and faith background, language, and social class) can lead people to experience unique blends of discrimination or privilege.<sup>15,16</sup> This blend of experiences can influence the language people use as well as their appearance. Clothing, makeup, haircuts, hair removal, and other aspects of gendered presentation or expression can be expensive and are often based on white, middle-class, Eurocentric ideas of gender. What is considered “normal” for men or women within one cultural context may not be the norm within another, and how somebody chooses to express themselves is influenced by not only their gender identity, but also their cultural background, availability of resources, and other factors. How somebody expresses themselves, therefore, is not always or only reflective of their gender identity.

Various cultures around the world recognize more than 2 genders. For example, many Indigenous cultures before the arrival of European colonizers on Turtle Island (North America) had 3 or more genders. In other parts of the world, some examples of a third gender include the Fa'afafines and Fa'afatamas in Samoa, the Hijra in South Asia, and the “ladyboys” in Thailand.<sup>15</sup>

While diverse gender identities in cultures around the world share some similarities with Western trans and nonbinary identities, they are not the same and each holds a specific meaning within their cultural context. Therefore, if you are working with someone who identifies themselves using a gendered term from a culture that you're not familiar with, it is best to try to learn what it means and avoid making assumptions.

For more on the intersection of experiences of racism and [cissexism](#), see [Humber College 2SLGBTQ+ Intersectionality Education Guide](#) and [Transgender people of color face unique challenges as gender discrimination and racism intersect](#).

## About Pronoun Use

In the English language, cis and trans women typically use the pronoun set *she/her*, and cis and trans men typically use *he/him*.

*They/them* is the most common gender-neutral pronoun set and the one most commonly used by nonbinary people. Other nonbinary pronoun sets include *ze/zir* (rhymes with bee/here) and *fae/faer* (pronounced like fay/fair).

Some trans and nonbinary people prefer to use multiple pronouns, such as both *she/they* and *any/all*, meaning you can use any and all pronouns.<sup>17,18</sup> A few trans people choose to use their name instead of pronouns (“Sally went to Sally’s doctor”) or use pronouns from another language, such as *han/hans*, which comes from the genderless third person pronoun in Finnish.<sup>19</sup>

Some people resist using gender-neutral pronouns. This resistance often stems not from malice, but from fear of saying the wrong thing or discomfort with change. It can be helpful to know that the word *they* has been used as a singular pronoun for hundreds of years. For example, it is common to say, “Someone forgot their water bottle on the table”.<sup>20,21</sup>

The word *pronoun* is used instead of *preferred pronoun*, which suggests using the person’s pronouns is optional rather than a requirement. The exception to this is if someone uses multiple pronouns (eg, *he/they*, *any/all*), in which case they may have a preference among the pronouns they use.

Table 1 lists a few examples of common neopronouns. There are many more pronouns than are listed in this guide and new ones are always emerging. For more on how to use some of the more common neopronouns see [Understanding Neopronouns](#).

**Table 1.** Common Gender Pronouns

Subjective	Objective	Possessive	Reflexive	Example
She	Her	Hers	Herself	She is speaking. I listened to her. The backpack is hers.
He	Him	His	Himself	He is speaking. I listened to him. The backpack is his.
They	Them	Theirs	Themselves	They are speaking. I listened to them. The backpack is theirs.
Ze	Hir/Zir	Hirs/Zirs	Hirself/Zirself	Ze is speaking. I listened to hir. The backpack is zirs.

Note: These are not the only pronouns in use. There are an infinite number of pronouns as new ones emerge in English. Always ask someone for their pronouns.

Source: [Trans Student Educational Resources](#). For more information go to [transstudent.org/graphics](https://transstudent.org/graphics)

## Using Pronouns *en français*

In French, *il/ils* are masculine pronouns and *elle/elles* are feminine pronouns. The pronouns *iel* and *iels*, which combine *il/ils* and *elle/elles*, are now recognized as gender-neutral pronouns in French.<sup>22</sup>

French is a grammatically gendered language that reinforces the masculine-feminine binary, which brings complexity to efforts to use gender-neutral language. However, there are resources, guides, and emerging practices to support trans- and nonbinary-inclusive language in French settings. Strategies include using gender-neutral adjectives, alternating between 2 spellings, combining them, and restructuring sentences to avoid gendered spellings. As with English, the best approach is to ask the individual what pronouns they want you to use.

For guidance on the use of pronouns and gender-inclusive language in French, please see the following resources:

- [Grammaire de genre neutre et langage inclusif - Egale](#)
- [French Style Guide - Egale](#)
- [Guide de grammaire neutre et inclusive - Divergenes](#)

## General Advice for Pronoun Use

Some trans women feel the need to dress in a masculine way to feel safer in certain settings, such as when taking public transit. Uniforms and dress codes, and even ideas about professional attire at work, also can cause people to dress in ways that don't match their gender. Some trans and [gender nonconforming](#) people are also actively working to de-gender clothing and question the idea that any particular gender has "a look." Therefore, never assume a person's gender identity by their appearance or assume you know which pronoun you should use. The only way to know a person's pronouns is for them to tell you.

Trans people are often asked invasive or intrusive questions about their bodies.<sup>4</sup> While it's important to ask a trans person which pronouns you should use, avoid asking personal questions you would not feel comfortable asking a cisgender person. This includes questions about a person's medical history or surgeries, unless you are a healthcare provider and need this information to provide them care they need.

Table 2 provides some specific scenarios and guidance for appropriate use of pronouns in the workplace.

**Table 2.** Pronoun Guidance for Specific Scenarios

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**A person uses multiple pronouns** (eg. *she/they; any/all*): Ask how they would like their pronouns used. Often, if a person does have a preference among multiple pronouns, they will put this pronoun first when they list their pronouns. For example, *he/they* would indicate the person primarily prefers *he/him* but also uses *they/them*.

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**A person doesn't have a preference about pronouns:** If they inform you they don't have a preference, it might be appropriate to use a mix of pronouns ("Sam forgot his water bottle in my office. They're going to wonder where it is later").

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**A person uses different pronouns depending on the context** (eg, someone might prefer *he/him* pronouns when dressed in a traditionally masculine way/presenting as a man and *she/her* when dressed in a traditionally feminine way/presenting as a woman; someone might prefer one set of pronouns at work and another in their personal life): This is something you can only know by asking the person how they like their pronouns to be used.<sup>23</sup>

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**You don't have an opportunity to ask the person their pronouns or how they like their multiple pronouns to be used:** Consider using gender-neutral pronouns, or the first pronoun listed, if you have seen the person's pronouns in writing, until you know for sure. Note: *Don't use gender-neutral pronouns as a blanket approach for all trans or gender nonconforming people.* Continuing to use gender-neutral pronouns when a person has stated their pronouns are *she/her* or *he/him* is a form of misgendering.

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**If you knew a trans person before they came out or before they transitioned:** Use their current name and pronouns even when talking about the past. Never share with other people that the person is trans without their permission.

## Normalizing Pronouns

When facilitating introductions (eg, during group programming, meetings, or events), include your own pronouns as you introduce yourself (“Hello. I’m Jane Smith and my pronouns are she/her”). This is not necessary at every meeting among groups that meet regularly, but occasional refreshers can be useful as names and pronouns can change.

While stating pronouns during an introduction is a best practice, do not make it mandatory. If someone does not disclose their pronouns, just move on. It is possible that they simply forgot, but it is also possible that they are not comfortable sharing this information (eg, if someone is questioning their gender).

When referring to people who are not trans, use the term *cisgender*. For example, say, “I am a cis man” instead of “I am a man,” or write “cis and trans women” instead of “women, including trans women.” Not including the word *cis* when referring to cis women or men can suggest that cis is “normal” and trans people are a subcategory.

When addressing a group of people, use a gender-neutral greeting. For example, instead of using terms such as ladies, gentlemen, or guys, try using terms such as colleagues, everyone, valued guests, team, or folks.

When possible, include your pronouns on nametags, email signatures, and business cards, and next to your name on virtual platforms. Organizations should allow staff to wear pronoun pins.<sup>6,24</sup>

For more information, visit [What’s Your Pronoun? Strategies for Inclusion in the Workplace](#).

## Ongoing Learning

If you are having trouble getting used to gender-neutral pronouns, try practicing with a friend or colleague.

Language shifts and changes over time. Terms for gender and pronouns not used in this document may become common. You don’t need to memorize all of the terms and language. Ask people how to refer to them, mirror the language they use, and try to find ways to stay up to date on the topic.

Rainbow Health Ontario’s [Resource Library](#) can be a useful tool to stay up to date or acquire detailed information about a specific area related to 2S/ LGBTQIA+ inclusion and health care.

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## Written Materials

Use gender-inclusive language in all your written materials, such as training and orientation documents, presentations, policy documents, job descriptions, and reports. Whenever possible, ensure that written materials don’t use people’s previous names and that forms and questionnaires don’t force people to choose between binary options.

Changing names and gender markers on official identification is a complicated process that can take a lot of time and money. If you are required to use a person’s legal name (eg, in correspondence with human resources about a staff member), ensure that their chosen name is more prominent and that their legal name isn’t visible to anyone who doesn’t require the information.<sup>25,26,27</sup>



## Gender-Inclusive Language in Physical Spaces

The Ontario Human Rights Code states that trans people have the right to use the bathroom that best matches their gender identity.<sup>14,28</sup> When possible, remove gendered language on bathroom door signs. The sign could show what is inside the room (stalls, stalls and urinals) instead of saying “Men” and “Women” (Figure 1). It can be helpful to designate the only single-stall bathroom as the all-gender bathroom, but it can also limit space for disabled people and families with infants and children.

For spaces that remain gendered, adding door signage about gender inclusivity can help. Including a sign that tells people they can use the bathroom that best aligns with their gender identity helps trans people feel safer and reminds cis people that they are to share the space (Figure 2).

If possible, include information about the location of the nearest all-genders bathroom.<sup>28,29</sup>

In addition to changing bathroom signage, organizations must create policies, procedures, and organizational messaging that aligns with the Ontario Human Rights Code.<sup>14</sup> For more information see [Preventing and Responding to Discrimination](#) as well as [Putting Trans Inclusion into Practice During and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

Figure 1. Non-Gendered Bathroom Signage Suggestions



Source: TransHub. Bathrooms. [transhub.org.au/allies/bathrooms](https://transhub.org.au/allies/bathrooms)

Figure 2. Gender-Inclusive Bathroom Signage Suggestions



Source: Washington State Employees; LGBTQ+ Business Resource Group. July 2019. [ofm.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/shr/Diversity/DEIMEDIA/Inclusive-Bathroom-Signage-Recommendations\\_RAIN.pdf](https://ofm.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/shr/Diversity/DEIMEDIA/Inclusive-Bathroom-Signage-Recommendations_RAIN.pdf)



## What to Do if You Make a Mistake

Mistakes happen. If you catch yourself misgendering someone, a quick and sincere apology before moving on is all that is required (eg, “As he was saying — I’m sorry — as they were saying”). Do not dwell on it or try to explain your mistake.<sup>30</sup>

If you make a mistake during an online meeting, send a brief private message to the person you misgendered and make sure you switch to the correct pronouns for the remainder of the meeting. For example, “Hi, [name]. I’m so sorry that I used the wrong pronoun. I understand how important pronouns are and I will do better.” If you miss correcting yourself in the moment, send a brief apology after the meeting.

If someone corrects you, say “thank you.” It likely means that they feel safe bringing it up to you, so that you can continue to have a positive relationship.

If you are finding it difficult to remember a person’s pronouns, you can practice with a friend, family member, or even your pet. It can be helpful to come up with a couple of sentences each day about that person using their pronouns. There are also practice quizzes online to help you learn new pronouns, such as the [Pronoun Practice Tool](#).<sup>31</sup>

**Table 3** lists the steps to take if you catch yourself using the wrong pronoun when interacting with a trans or nonbinary person.

**Table 3.** What to Do if You Make a Mistake

<b>Be Calm</b>	Mistakes happen. Try not to be embarrassed or get defensive.
<b>Be Thankful</b>	Thank the person who corrected you.
<b>Apologize</b>	Say a quick “I’m sorry” and move on. There is no need to dwell on it.
<b>Do Better</b>	Commit to doing better. Say it and mean it.



## How to Be an Ally

Having to correct people’s pronoun use can be emotionally exhausting and often makes the person who is misgendered feel like they are mean or too sensitive. For this reason, most trans people appreciate it when someone else corrects a person who misgendered them.

If possible, ask the trans person ahead of time what they would like you to do if someone else uses the wrong pronoun. Some people do not want to

make a big deal out of mistakes, especially in one-off encounters. But in the workplace, it’s important to make sure coworkers know what is the correct pronoun they should be using.

How misgendering is handled also depends on the type of mistake made. The key principle is, if the person being misgendered is open about being trans, correct the person and move on. **Table 4** presents some common misgendering scenarios and possible solutions.

**Table 4.** Misgendering Scenarios and Possible Solutions

Scenario	Possible Solutions
Someone says “Hi, ladies!” in a meeting or group.	Respond “Hi, everyone.” If it feels safe to do so, you can add, “Some people don’t use the term <i>ladies</i> .”  An alternate approach would be to offer the person who said it this feedback later.
Someone in a virtual meeting uses the wrong pronoun for someone else in the meeting.	Ask the person who was misgendered (via private message) if they would like you to correct people when you are in meetings together: “Hi, I’m sorry you have to deal with misgendering again. Can I support you in any way? Can I send a quick message to [name] reminding them about your pronouns? If so, would you like me to continue to do this with others if it comes up in the future?”  Send a direct message to the person who used the wrong pronoun. For example, “Hi, just a quick reminder that [name]’s pronouns are <i>she/her</i> .”
Someone in an in-person meeting or group uses the wrong pronoun for someone else in attendance.	Correct them briefly by letting them know the correct pronouns. If they don’t get the hint, a more direct comment, “They use <i>they/them</i> pronouns,” may be needed.  If it continues to happen, approach the person being misgendered to ask how they would like you to address the problem. Offer to speak to a manager.
You use the wrong pronoun and are corrected.	Thank the person who corrected you. After the meeting, approach or message the person you misgendered and offer a quick apology.  Do not make it awkward by being overly apologetic or drawing more attention than needed. All that is needed is a quick apology, such as, “Hi, I’m sorry I messed up earlier, I will work to do better next time.”
You hear people using the wrong pronouns for a coworker or client when they are not around.	If it seems to be accident, remind them about the correct pronouns. Otherwise, discuss it with a manager.

Source: Out & Equal, [Best Practices for Non-Binary Inclusion in the Workplace](https://outandequal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/OE-Non-Binary-Best-Practices.pdf). Published November 2018. [outandequal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/OE-Non-Binary-Best-Practices.pdf](https://outandequal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/OE-Non-Binary-Best-Practices.pdf)

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