LGBT Lexicon

Presented by the ABA Commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Words we use to talk about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and issues can have a powerful impact so think before you speak. The right words can help open people’s hearts and minds, while others can create distance or confusion. Your ultimate choice of words should be motivated by the wish to demonstrate both accuracy and sensitivity. Here is a list of common terms. For an extensive list, please visit: http://geneq.berkeley.edu/lgbt_resources_definition_of_terms

How to define Sexual orientation, Gender identity, and Gender Expression

"Sexual orientation" is the preferred term used when referring to an individual's physical and/or emotional attraction to the same and/or opposite gender. "Heterosexual," "bisexual" and "homosexual" are all sexual orientations.

"Gender identity," refers to a person's innate, deeply felt psychological identification as male or female, which may or may not correspond to the person's body or designated sex at birth (meaning the sex originally designated on the person's birth certificate).

“Gender expression”, refers to how a person outwardly expresses their gender.

*Gender Identity and Gender Expression are not interchangeable terms
How to define lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, and other terms

"Lesbian": a woman whose physical and/or emotional attachments are to women.

"Gay": a man whose physical and/or emotional attachments are to men.

"Bisexual": a man or woman whose physical and/or emotional attractions and attachments are to persons of both genders.

“Transgender”: an umbrella term that includes individuals of varying gender behaviors, inclusive of, but not limited to: ‘transsexuals’ who experience and/or express their gender identify by identifying or referring to themselves as having a gender other than that listed on the individual's original birth certificate, or by physically changing their sex; ‘heterosexual cross dressers’ and ‘drag queens and kings,’ who identify as their natal gender, but present as another gender for social, political or economic reasons; ‘transvestites’ who cross dress for psychosexual reasons; and others who question their gender identity or expression.

“Transsexual”: refers to a person who experiences a mismatch of the sex they were born as and the sex they identify as. A transsexual sometimes undergoes medical treatment to change his/her physical sex to match his/her sex identity through hormone treatments and/or surgically. Not all transsexuals can have or desire surgery.

“Transition”: Transition is the accurate term that does not fixate on surgeries, which many transgender people do not or cannot undergo. Terms like “pre-op” or “post-op” unnecessarily fixate on a person’s anatomy and should be avoided.

“Straight’: Person who is attracted to a gender other than their own. Commonly thought of as “attraction to the opposite gender,” but since there are not only two genders (see transgender), this definition is inaccurate.
“Queer”: An umbrella term to refer to all LGBTIQ people; A political statement, as well as a sexual orientation, which advocates breaking binary thinking and seeing both sexual orientation and gender identity as potentially fluid; A simple label to explain a complex set of sexual behaviors and desires. For example, a person who is attracted to multiple genders may identify as queer; Many older LGBT people feel the word has been hatefully used against them for too long and are reluctant to embrace it.

“Cisgender”: A person who by nature or by choice conforms to gender/sex based expectations of society (also referred to as “Gender-straight” or “Gender Normative”)

“Genderqueer”: A person whose gender identity is neither man nor woman, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders. This identity is usually related to or in reaction to the social construction of gender, gender stereotypes and the gender binary system. Some genderqueer people identify under the transgender umbrella while others do not.