

Tips and guidance from our NLH LGBTQ+ experts and community members

As we go about overcoming our biases and learning how to be inclusive and respectful of every member of our human family, many of us bump up against a great fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. You'll find some expert guidance below from a few of our NLH specialists in addition to some advice from the individual perspective from a few of our co-workers.

Gender Specialists

[Chris McLaughlin, LCSW is the AVP of Community and Pediatric Services at Northern Light Acadia Hospital. He chairs Acadia's local DEI Committee and represents Acadia at the Northern Light Health System DEI Council. Chris's pronouns are he/him, and he identifies as gay.](#)

[Chris's guidance is in answer to the following questions I raised about how some LGBTQ+ people refer to themselves as queer: First question, what specifically does queer mean because it seems like it may be more of a general term. Second question, is queer a respectful term to use and are there some terms that only LGBTQ+ people use but aren't that acceptable for cisgender people to use?]

According to [The Trevor Project](#), the term "queer" is an umbrella term that is used to refer to an identity that expands outside of heterosexuality. This is a term that is becoming more and more commonplace, especially with younger generations. The increase in popularity of the term "queer" is a great example of what's known as "linguistic reappropriation", the cultural process by which a word with historically negative connotations or which was used as a slur towards an individual or a group is reclaimed by that community to bring about empowerment and positivity.

Many folks my age still may cringe when we hear the term "queer" because, back in our childhood days, it was a word steeped in shame and hate. However, I admire how resilient the LGBTQ+ community can be as they strive to take ownership and power of the term and embrace its renewed use and meaning. This brings up a great reminder when working with the LGBTQ+ community. We have to remember that words have meaning and power to them and strive to get more comfortable asking what terms someone is comfortable using to describe their own sexual orientation and/or gender identity. We cannot make assumptions that all members of a particular community will be OK with a word's use. Many LGBTQ+ folks do not identify as "queer".

And, conversely, many queer folks do not identify as LGBT. We must meet the individual where they are at and be respectful in our language to and about them. There are many additional words that the LGBTQ+ community may use as the process of linguistic reappropriation continues. These words, most of which we would recognize from the past as taunts, jeers, jabs, and insults thrown at a person based on their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, bring about the same caution as the term "queer". When spoken by a member of the LGBTQ+ community to describe themselves, we can then check in with that individual to ensure that

this is indeed a term that they would ask for us to use to capture their identity as well. Just because it's said, though, do not automatically assume that it's OK for you to use as well. My advice is simple: Watch those assumptions and generalizations, and when in doubt, ask that individual to share with you the term that best fits for them so you can respect their identity. Be genuine, be kind, and be respectful...just as you would want in return.

[Samantha Paradis is Primary Care Nurse Practitioner at AR Gould who identifies as queer and non-binary.](#)

1. When meeting someone for the first time, introduce yourself with your name and then ask what the other person would like to be addressed as. Generally, avoid using gender specific language including ma'am or sir. As an example, avoid addressing crowds as ladies and gentlemen. Instead, use gender neutral addresses like folks or y'all.
2. For caregivers, do your homework and have cultural humility. Research and read about current acceptable language and cultural practice before asking patients to answer questions about LGBTQ health. Do not rely on queer patients to provide your education. When you first use a new term, have humility and know that you may get it wrong the first few times. Be open to being corrected.

[Karin Heim is a psychiatric clinician in the Pediatric Outpatient Services at Acadia Hospital. Karen is also a member of the LGBTQ+ community and uses the pronouns she/her.](#)

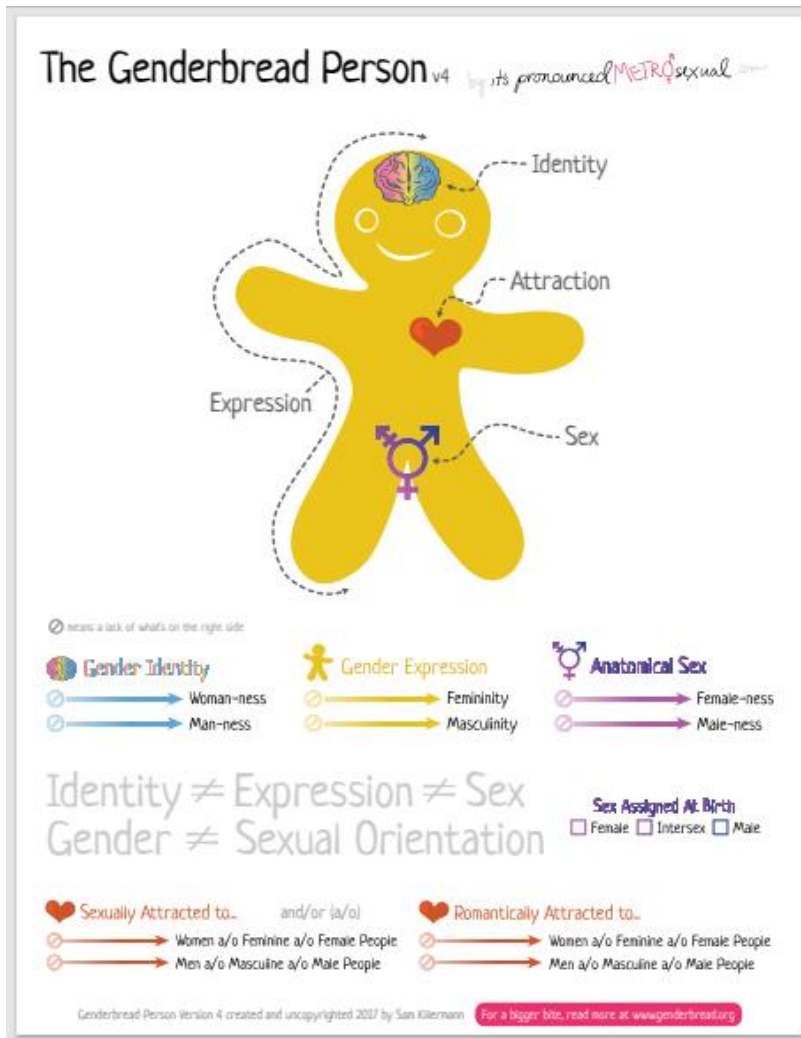
1. For parents, providers, caregivers, family, friends, and allies of LGBTQ+ youth – research shows that unconditional support for the youth in your life can significantly reduce or eliminate mental health symptoms and the risk for suicide and self-harm. Even if you don't understand it or think it is just a phase, the number one thing I hear in my work with these patients about the adults in their lives is "I wish they would just try." Even if you make mistakes and are not perfect, you are on this journey with them, and the best thing you can do to support them is to just try.
2. I hear from a lot of parents, caregivers, and families of LGBTQ+ youth who say things like, "We didn't have all this stuff when I was their age," or "They're just doing this to fit in with their friends/they saw it on the internet," or "It's just a phase." I take an empathetic, educational approach to this and tell them, "Maybe, but what we do know is that LGBTQ+ people have always existed across time and cultures; we are just now reaching a place where it is safer for people to come out. Which might make it seem like there are more LGBTQ+ people, but in reality people are just freer to live as their most authentic selves than they were before. And if the child/adolescent is doing it just to fit in or it is just a phase, then so what?! We expect young people to experiment with their identities in all sorts of ways, whether it is hair/ makeup, clothing, friend groups, hobbies/ interests, etc. Why should we expect them to know from a young age and then

stick with one gender identity or sexuality for their entire lives?”

So, even if you have these doubts about an LGBTQ+ youth in your life, it is okay to feel that way AND to still offer them unconditional support.

[Anna Mayo, PsyD](#), is a pediatric psychologist in Pediatric Specialty Care who identifies as cis het (cisgender and heterosexual) and uses she/her pronouns.

My tip is related to using the Genderbread Person infographic included in the Wellness Wednesday article.



You'll notice that a common theme in the tips & advice shared today is the importance of not making assumptions about others' gender identity and sexual orientation. How can you begin working on this? Start with yourself! Here's an exercise to expand your understanding of gender identity:

1. Think about how you define what it means to be masculine and feminine. How does a masculine person dress? How do they act? What sort of activities do they enjoy? What about a feminine person?

2. Now think about yourself. How do you like to dress? How do you interact with others? What sort of interests and activities do you enjoy?

3. Do these aspects of you fit neatly in categories of masculine

or feminine? In what ways do you not fit? Are there things about you that a mix of feminine and masculine? How do you think others would describe you?

4. Now try this exercise thinking about a family member or a close friend who has the same gender identity as you. Consider the ways you are similar or different to each other.

My hope is that you recognize that your gender identity is so much more than the label. People are wonderfully complex, and even amongst people with the same gender identity, there is great variability.

Members of the LGBTQ+ community

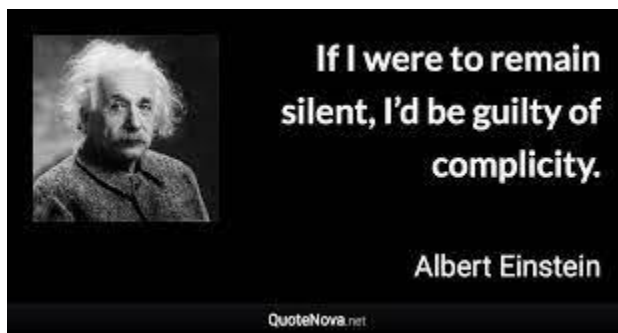
Note: Facilitating open, honest and respectful conversation is essential in the work to bring truer understanding about all the different groups making up our human family. There will be divergent viewpoints within members of the same group as we all would expect. As such, each voice is individual and speaks only for themselves.

[Robby Desjardins is a speech pathologist who work with people who are seeking gender affirming voice services. Robby is also a member of the LGBTQ community.](#)

1. My biggest piece of advice would be for people to expand upon their knowledge of LGBTQ+ microaggressions and how they can be invasive and damaging to those they are directed towards. Even well-meaning people can use them so being proactive and learning what NOT to say is so important. Here are a couple of microaggressions which includes one that can be maneuvered around professionally but is off limits in the social context:
 - a. **Assuming one partner is the “man” and the other is the “woman” in an LGBTQ+ relationship.** There’s no way to ask this without being offensive but rather if it were a clinical question such as when speech pathologists are doing cognitive assessments and need to make judgements on the person’s ability to complete everyday tasks easily, it could be framed as, “How are the chores divided up amongst you both?” This assumes no specific gender roles are being prescribed to each person based on heteronormative influence.
 - b. **Referring to being LGBTQ+ as a “choice” or “lifestyle.”** On a personal level, this is what hurts many of us the most. ALL LGBTQ+ people do NOT choose anything; they are simply being their authentic selves. To say it’s a lifestyle plays into a negative stereotype and implies we choose a life of sexual promiscuity, drug/alcohol use, and poor decision making which is not the case at all. Many LGBTQ+ people I know are your lawyers, your doctors, your trusted friend, and maybe even your speech therapist. I can tell you from experience that the LGBTQ+ lifestyle in my house includes feeding the cat and making dinner before watching Netflix and being asleep by 9 because you have work in the morning 😊. It’s about that exciting....
2. Secondly, like every other person, LGBTQ+ people want the same things everyone wants: safety, security, love and acceptance. To help us achieve this, It’s not enough to support the LGBTQ+ community privately but we must all be compelled to be active members of the community who will stand up to inequity and have peaceful conversations with those who have differing viewpoints.

I think many people avoid topics of race and LGBTQ+ issues specifically because of their privilege. It's easy to dismiss yourself from the conversation if it doesn't affect you. People shouldn't wait until they find out they have a gay son or daughter to start the conversation. Get active! Donate to LGBTQ+ organizations that help at-risk youth. Ask them what their needs are and how you can help. Don't just put out a pride flag without having an open conversation with your next-door neighbors about what flying this flag it means to you. Ask them how they feel about your flag and open the channel of communication any way you can. When you see inequity, challenge it and use your privilege for positive!

Let's change hearts and minds through activism in our own families and neighbors to make the biggest impact.



[Janet Grivois is a physical therapy assistant for Northern Light Home Care & Hospice who identifies as part of the catch all of LGBTQ+](#)

*Don't assume if someone is wearing a wedding ring, they are married to someone of the same sex or the opposite sex. Marriage equality in Maine has been around since 2013 and 2015 on the national level. Instead of asking, "How long have you been married to your husband/wife?" ask, "How long have you been married?" As a person who travels a lot, I often was asked, "Does your husband like you gallivanting around the country?" My answer: "No, my wife doesn't mind."

*For all our LGBTQ+ community, remember that some people come from a place of not understanding. Be kind. If they are not kind back, disengage. You can only teach someone who wants to be educated. The same goes for us: as a community, we have to be open to the fact that not everyone will "love" us. That is a fact of life. How WE answer to someone is as paramount as how they address us. Respect is a 2-way street.

*Never assume that the short-haired tomboy is the one who does the "man" work around the house. I can assure you, my long-haired wife can wield a drill, mow the lawn, etc., as well as I can. Don't assume that anyone falls into traditional roles that includes anyone, overall. We have stay-at-home dads with moms being the major bread winners.

*Remember that someone in the LGBTQ+ community is only trying to live their lives. Ask a question if you want to know, phrase it in a way that is least obtrusive and with kindness and we will answer. We love talking about our husbands, wives, kids, pets! Just like anyone else.

*Sexual preference is a misnomer. No one would choose to be LGBTQ; it is how someone is born – same as if you have blue eyes, someone of the LGBTQ+ ilk is born that way.

*Some, not all, in the LGBTQ+ community have moved into a “I have to teach everyone” mode which, at times, cuts off the free-flowing dialogue we should be having. Instead of being in your face, be subtle and be kind. This will allow someone to open up and not be embarrassed about making a mistake when asking you something “the wrong way.”

When marriage equality came up for a vote in 2012, a close neighbor of ours, whom I’d known all of my life, explained to me: “I’m going to vote that you can get married, even though, in the Bible, it isn’t OK. Do you know why? You are no different than anyone else: you shop together, live together, bought a home together. You are just wanting to be you. I saw that; I had never seen it before.” He went on to explain that those who “flaunt” their sexuality, instead of just owning it, bring up those feelings of not understanding. He and I had had several short talks before about this. My wife and I don’t fly a rainbow flag, we just “are.” In his eyes, that is what drove things home that we were no different than any other couple. Who was he to tell anyone else who to love. It is hard to hate someone you know.

A few resources for appreciating and learning about our LGBTQ+ members of the human family

[The Trevor Project](#)

[Transgender - Northern Light Health](#)

[7 LGBTQ+ Mental Health and Wellness Instagram Accounts to Follow \(happify.com\)](#)

[Gender Basics for Parents with Joel Baum | PFLAG](#)

[Keeping Siblings Seen and Supported with Dr. Anderson and Mr. Doherty | PFLAG](#)

[Parents: Quick Tips for Supporting Your LGBTQ Kids--and YOURSELF--During the Coming-Out Process | PFLAG](#)

[Support Group Intake Form \(tfaforms.com\)](#)

[Gender Spectrum | Supportive Parenting Gender Spectrum](#)

[Weekly Programs - OUT Maine](#)

[Online Support Groups — MaineTransNet](#)

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/> - They also have a 24/7 hotline, texting line, and online chat for youth in crisis, that I recommend all the time!

[Homepage | GLSEN](#)

[PFLAG |](#)

[Trans Student Educational Resources - TSER](#)