

## Let's Talk About Gender

We've all asked "Is it a boy or a girl?" when the birth of a baby is announced. Pretty innocuous, right? But what if you are speaking with someone about their\* gender and that person is a youth or adult? It can get sensitive rather quickly.

Perhaps I can help!

Many "Boomers" have embraced most of the social, cultural and technological changes that Generations Y and Z have simply grown up with. However, an area that has continued to be a challenge for some concerns the discussion of gender roles and related topics. Self-consciousness, embarrassment or uncertainty about word meanings can make conversations difficult. This can result in misunderstanding and frustration for everyone.

When discussing matters around sex or gender, it is important to be respectful, non-judgmental and open to learning about things which we may not understand. Often these issues are of vital importance to others' well-being and their mental and physical health because they are strongly connected to a person's emotions and feelings of self-worth, dignity and love. It's okay to say "I didn't know..." or "I don't understand...". It's never okay to lecture, judge, threaten, accuse, argue or appear hurt, disappointed or offended.

Are we talking about "*gender*" or "*sex*"? Sex is biological and has historically been thought to be a simple binary choice: male or female.

Gender refers to “the role of a male or female in society, known as a *gender role*, or an individual’s concept of themselves, their *gender identity*. Sometimes, a person’s physical sex, male or female, does not match their gender identity, how they see themselves. Someone who doesn’t identify with the sex or gender they were assigned at birth might identify as *transgender*.

That brings us to *gender-expression*: how one chooses to present oneself to others via one’s appearance and behaviour. A person might present to others as masculine, but actually feel or see themselves as being feminine. Conversely, an individual might appear feminine to others but internally feel more aligned with society’s masculine traits and expectations. Gender is not a simple case of being one or the other. It is a spectrum with as many unique expressions as there are individuals.

The disparity between self-identity and the expectations of others, when combined with the fear of rejection, negative judgment, harassment or violence, is a source of inner struggle and anguish for many in that position. The struggle to find and accept one’s true gender identity in the face of conflicting expectations can result in years of painful confusion, self-doubt and possibly thoughts or acts of self-harm or suicide.

A recent example of this is the Time magazine cover story about Halifax-born actor Elliot Page (March 29-April 5, 2021) outlining his years of inner turmoil. In Page’s words, “I felt like a boy...I wanted to be a boy. I would ask my mom if I could be someday...I could not even look at a photo of myself.”

Many of these terms and concepts are confusing to some, but the important takeaway here is to always show respect for others, even when when they do not conform to one’s own preconceived notions

or expectations. That respect is shown by using the pronouns they have chosen for themselves: she/her/hers for female gender expression, he/him/his for male gender, or they/them/their for non-specific gender expressions.

A transgender male should only be referred to as “he/him/his” and a *trans* female as “she/her/hers”. Someone who does not wish to be identified in a traditional male/female manner should be referred to using “they/them/their”.

It is also important to note that a transgender person is always referred to by their chosen name, and never by a previous name, unless it’s done with their consent. For example, articles about Elliot Page only use his present name, even when referring to his earlier career and movie roles.

Sometimes deciding which pronoun to use isn’t obvious. Gender, like beauty, can be in the eye of the beholder. If uncertain as to which pronoun to use, one can introduce oneself with one’s own pronouns: “I’m Taylor. My pronouns are they/them. What are your pronouns?” Deliberately refusing to use someone else’s preferred pronouns is offensive, disrespectful and may stir an emotional reaction in that person.

Now that we have some basic understanding about gender, we need to distinguish it from *sexual orientation*. One definition defines sexual orientation as a pattern of emotional, romantic or sexual attraction that includes attraction to the same gender (homosexuality, “*gay*”), a gender different than your own (heterosexuality, “*straight*”), attraction to both male and female (bisexuality, “*bi*”), all genders (pansexual), or neither gender (asexuality).

Note that “transgender” is not a sexual orientation, but a gender expression even though it is part of the commonly used acronym *LGBTQ2S* (*lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer\*\*/questioning, two-spirited (Indigenous)*).

We know that words are powerful. So, how does one initiate what could potentially be a difficult conversation about gender expression, sexual orientation, or both since they are intertwined, especially considering possible differences in attitudes, age, understanding and vocabulary? An important first step is to prepare the information and feelings one wishes to share. Be aware of the mood and stresses that might be affecting the parties involved and then select a favourable time to talk.

There are many less-threatening options for broaching a sensitive topic. With so many representations of gender non-conforming people and situations presented in all media platforms and online searches, it is fairly easy to find gender-related ice-breakers. Examples could be the Elliot Page article or tuning in to a tv show such as *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. A conversation could start with something simple, such as "I think...What do you think...?", "I liked hearing about....", "I didn't know that..." "I heard/saw/read/wonder ...", opening a door, encouraging but not forcing a response.

All of these openers, and others, can be used to test the waters in order to get a sense of how receptive, accepting or judgmental others might be, then deciding whether or not to proceed with a full conversation at that time.

In any case, one should prepare by anticipating possible reactions, questions and emotions and realizing that some personal revelations might take time for others to process, understand or accept. This might be particularly true if the relationship has been strained in the past.

Of course, there are also options to delay or ignore the need to initiate conversations about gender or sexual orientation, out of fear of arousing difficult feelings and emotions. However, this choice could lead to missed opportunities to foster understanding, compassion and strengthen relationships. Worse, one might look back with regret at not doing so. These are words all of us wish we never have to say: “If only I had known...”, “I wish I had told you....”, “I needed you to...”, “Why didn’t you...?”.

Being able to talk about important personal matters will hopefully strengthen personal relationships and build positive social attitudes and behaviours that we all want to see: understanding, compassion, respect, dignity and equal human rights for every Canadian.

Always reach for professional help from local agencies and organizations if someone is struggling with their mental health or is in a personal crisis.

I hope you will continue to learn more about gender-related topics. Some free online resources include:

[youthline.ca](http://youthline.ca)

[pflagcanada.ca](http://pflagcanada.ca)

[healthline.com](http://healthline.com)

[cmha.ca](http://cmha.ca)

[hrc.org](http://hrc.org)

[medicalnewstoday.com](http://medicalnewstoday.com)

\*We will be using the pronouns “they” and “them” instead of ‘he’ or ‘she’ when referring to single individuals to be inclusive of people whose gender identity does not fit a traditional male or female category.

\*\* A term to be used with caution: offensive to some, but also used with pride and assertiveness by others. This word means different things to different people and can have both negative and positive connotations. Best to avoid it using if unsure.

by Fort Papalia, (He/Him)

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