

Understanding Non-Binary People: How to Be Respectful and Supportive

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Non-Binary Defined

Most people – including most transgender people – are either male or female. But some people don't neatly fit into the categories of "man" or "woman," or "male" or "female." For example, some people have a gender that blends elements of being a man or a woman, or a gender that is different than either male or female. Some people don't identify with any gender. Some people's gender changes over time.

People whose gender is not male or female use many different terms to describe themselves, with **non-binary** being one of the most common. Other terms include **genderqueer**, **agender**, **bigender**, and more. None of these terms mean exactly the same thing – but all speak to an experience of gender that is not simply male or female.

(Note: NCTE uses both the adjectives "male" and "female" and the nouns "man" and "woman" to refer to a person's gender identity (<https://transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding-transgender-people-the-basics>.)

Why "Non-Binary"?

Some societies – like ours – tend to recognize just two genders, male and female. The idea that there are only two genders is sometimes called a "gender binary," because binary means "having two parts" (male and female). Therefore, "non-binary" is one term people use to describe genders that don't fall into one of these two categories, male or female.

Basic Facts about Non-Binary People

Non-binary people are nothing new. Non-binary people aren't confused about their gender identity or following a new fad – non-binary identities have been recognized for millennia by cultures and societies around the world.

Some, but not all, non-binary people undergo medical procedures to make their bodies more congruent with their gender identity. While not all non-binary people need medical care to live a fulfilling life, it's critical and even life-saving for many.

Most transgender people are not non-binary. While some transgender people are non-binary, most transgender people have a gender identity that is either male or female, and should be treated like any other man or woman.

Being non-binary is not the same thing as being intersex. Intersex people have anatomy or genes that don't fit typical definitions of male and female. Most intersex people identify as either men or women. Non-binary people are usually not intersex: they're usually born with bodies that may fit typical definitions of male and female, but their innate gender identity is something other than male or female.

How to Be Respectful and Supportive of Non-Binary People

It isn't as hard as you might think to be supportive and respectful of non-binary people, even if you have just started to learn about them.

You don't have to understand what it means for someone to be non-binary to respect them. Some people haven't heard a lot about non-binary genders or have trouble understanding them, and that's okay. But identities that some people don't understand still deserve respect.

Use the name a person asks you to use. This is one of the most critical aspects of being respectful of a non-binary person, as the name you may have been using may not reflect their gender identity. Don't ask someone what their old name was.

Try not to make any assumptions about people's gender. You can't tell if someone is non-binary simply by looking at them, just like how you can't tell if someone is transgender just by how they look.

If you're not sure what pronouns someone uses, ask. Different non-binary people may use different pronouns. Many non-binary people use "they" while others use "he" or "she," and still others use other pronouns (<https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>). Asking whether someone should be referred to as "he," "she," "they," or another pronoun may feel awkward at first, but is one of the simplest and most important ways to show respect for someone's identity.

Advocate for non-binary friendly policies. It's important for non-binary people to be able to live, dress and have their gender respected at work, at school and in public spaces.

Understand that, for many non-binary people, figuring out which bathroom to use can be challenging. For many non-binary people, using either the women's or the men's room might feel unsafe, because others may verbally harass them or even physically attack them. Non-binary people should be supported by being able to use the restroom that they believe they will be safest in.

Talk to non-binary people to learn more about who they are. There's no one way to be non-binary. The best way to understand what it's like to be non-binary is to talk with non-binary people and listen to their stories.

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