

LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Communication

Tips for service workers



Government of
South Australia



human
services

When talking with someone on the phone, face-to-face or via email it can be easy to make assumptions about their gender identity based on their name or the sound of their voice. These assumptions won't always be accurate though, which can lead to accidentally misgendering someone (addressing them as an incorrect gender).

While it is possible to misgender anyone, this is a particularly common experience when transgender, gender diverse and non-binary people seek access to services. This can be deeply hurtful and can discourage them from seeking help in the future.

The following tips can assist service workers to avoid misgendering people and to provide more respectful services.

Avoiding gendered language

Gendered terms such as 'sir' or 'ma'am' can be commonplace in conversation, especially in more formal settings, or if the person's name is unknown. While some people will prefer the use of gendered terms, there can be a risk of misgendering someone.

To minimise this risk, it is possible to avoid gendered language, for example:

- **"Hello, how can I help you today?"**
instead of **"Hello sir/ma'am, how can I help you today?"**
- **"Thank you for that"** instead of **"Thank you sir/ma'am"**
- Referring to someone by their first name rather than saying "Mr/Ms Smith."

Appropriately asking about gender identity and pronouns

Asking someone about their gender identity and/or their pronouns (i.e. he/him or she/her) is another way to avoid misgendering someone, however these can be personal questions so it's important to ensure you ask in a respectful manner and for a valid reason.

If asking someone about their gender identity or pronouns, open questions can be useful, such as:

- **"What are your pronouns?"** or **"Which pronouns do you use?"**
- **"What is your gender identity?"** or **"Can you confirm your gender for me?"**

Be aware that some people identify as a gender other than male or female, or use pronouns other than he/him or she/her. For example, some people are non-binary (neither a man or a woman) and use gender neutral pronouns (they/them).

There are various other gender identities and pronouns, too. If someone uses a term you're unfamiliar with, the best option is to take some time to learn about the term at a later time rather than asking them to explain it to you.

Tips to talking about gender and pronouns

- If you're unsure of someone's pronouns, using they/them pronouns can be appropriate.
- By contrast, the pronoun 'it' should be avoided as it is dehumanising and disrespectful. 'It' should only be used if the individual has specifically stated this is the pronoun they use.
- If possible, try to ask someone what pronouns they use. This avoids misgendering and is a sign for transgender and gender diverse people that you are respectful of gender diversity.
- When talking about a transgender person, it is better to say the person 'is' transgender rather than saying they 'identify as' transgender. 'Identify as' implies their gender is a choice.

Using the correct name

Sometimes, a person's legal name (i.e. the name on their birth certificate or driver's license) may not align with the name they use. This may be because they prefer to use a nickname or, in the case of transgender or gender diverse people, because they have not changed their legal name.

As a matter of best practice, use the name that the person identifies with, even if this is different to their legal name. Only use their legal name when required, such as if needing to confirm the name on their ID. If you do need to use their legal name, consider providing a brief explanation as to why this is the case.

Using inclusive language when providing ongoing support

It can be frustrating having to tell multiple people the same information, especially when that information is quite personal. If you need to connect a transgender or gender diverse person with a colleague or it's likely that they will need to contact your service again in the future, consider how their name and pronouns can be recorded for future use. This can minimise the risk of them being misgendered in the future and ensures that whenever they engage with your service they are treated respectfully.

What do I do if I make a mistake?

We all make mistakes, especially if we have had limited engagement with transgender and gender diverse people in the past. The important thing is that we learn from our mistakes, so we reduce the risk of using incorrect names or pronouns in the future.

If someone corrects you for using the wrong name or pronouns, acknowledge your mistake and correct yourself without making it a big deal. If you find yourself struggling to use a person's name or pronouns, consider practicing the use of that terminology with a colleague – like most things, using inclusive language gets easier with practice!

Additional information

Consider visiting the following websites for more information about gender diversity and gender inclusive language:

- [TransHub](#)
- [Trans Health SA](#)
- [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#) – Glossary of common LGBTIQ+ terms.