

Trans Etiquette/Respect/Support 101

by Micah Bazant, 2002 (updated in 2011)
from *Timtum: A Trans Jew Zine*

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I am using the word ‘trans’ in the broadest sense, to include terms like genderqueer, transgender and transsexual. This was written from my own experience as a white *timtum*¹/trans person. Of course, every trans person is different, and would write this list differently. Also, some things, which are totally inappropriate with strangers or acquaintances, may be fine or welcomed in the context of a trusting relationship. For example, health care providers and partners of trans people may need to know and discuss trans-related things that wouldn’t be ok to discuss in a more casual relationship. This list is written primarily for acquaintances, friends, co-workers, etc.

I’m sad to say that I’ve done most of the things on this list at some point in my life, and had most of them done to me even by other trans people. As with other forms of oppression, they are socialized into us from birth. We are all taught to be transphobic, and unlearning it is a process and a responsibility.

Pronouns and Self-Identification

Respect everyone’s self-identification. Call everyone by their preferred name/s and pronoun/s. Use language and behavior that is appropriate to their gender self-identification. Do this for everyone, all the time, no matter how much you think they deviate from what a “real man” or “real woman” should be.

What we truly know ourselves to be should be the only determinant of our gender in society. Set aside your doubts, start educating yourself and respect that we are who we say we are. By doing this you are saying: “I see you, I support you, I respect you.” By not doing this, you let trans people know: “I don’t understand you and I’m not trying to. What you tell me about yourself is not important, all that’s important is how I think of you. I am not your ally. You are not safe with me.” Being referred to or treated as the wrong gender feels painful and disrespectful to us.

¹ *Timtum* (Yiddish, derived from *tumtum*, Hebrew) is one of the non-binary categories of ancient Jewish gender systems. It refers to a person whose sexual characteristics are mysterious or not easily categorized. It is referenced 181 times in Mishna and Talmud; 335 times in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.

It is hard and dangerous to change your name and pronoun. Know that it has taken a lot of courage for this person to let you know who they really are; they are sharing something very precious. It may seem hard or silly to you at first, but it can be a matter of life and death for us.

If you don't know what pronouns or gender-labels someone prefers (and there's no mutual friend around to clue you in), just ask them. Politely. And respectfully. For example: "What pronoun do you prefer?" or "How do you like to be referred to, in terms of gender?"

Usually when people can't immediately determine someone's gender, they become afraid and hostile. If you misrecognize someone's gender, it's okay, don't freak out. Apologize once and get it right the next time. Misidentifying or being unable to classify someone's gender does not have to be an awkward or shameful experience. By asking someone in the right way, you can indirectly communicate: 'I want to be respectful of you and I don't want to make any assumptions. I see your gender ambiguity and/or fluid gender expression as a positive, fabulous, creative and honest (need I go on?) thing.'

Some trans people are bravely making more space for gender diversity by using language creatively. Respect these efforts and don't dismiss them as silly, funny, weird or too difficult. (Remember Mahatma Ghandi's words: "First they ignored us, then they laughed at us, then they tried to fight us, then we won.") For example, some people prefer to be referred to as 'they', or as both 'he' and 'she' interchangeably. Some people prefer to be referred to only by their name. Some people use non-binary pronouns like 'ze' and 'hir'.

Invasive Questions

Medical Information: You do NOT have the right to know any medical or anatomical information about anyone else's body, unless they decide to share it with you. This means: don't ask about their genitals, their surgeries, the effects of their hormones, etc. This is private! The first question usually asked to trans people is, "Do you have a penis?" or "Do you have a vagina?" Would you ask a cisgender² person about their genitals? To do so is incredibly invasive and disrespectful. It reduces us to one body part, as if all the rest of our minds, hearts, bodies, contributions and personalities are not important. Our bodies are not a community forum, or a tool to educate you!

Also, don't ask us about our surgeries, medications, etc. If we want you to know about something, we'll bring it up. For example, just because your friend-of-a friend-of-a-trans person told you that someone is having surgery, doesn't mean you have a right to come up and ask them about it (especially in front of other people).

2 *Cisgender* means non-transgender. The prefix or adjective *cis* means "not trans," derived from the Latin word meaning "on the same side." For more definitions see Erin Houdini's *Awesome Trans Glossary*: <https://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=0AcHP5xGhVLvmZGRnY3RocWdfMHc4ZHpza2c3&hl=en&pli=1>.

TRANSTORAH

Don't ask us if we've had a "sex change operation." Gender transition doesn't happen through one magic operation. And the operation you're thinking of probably involves transforming our genitals, which, again, is reductive and disrespectful. Some of us never want to have any surgeries. Some of us desperately want surgery and can't afford it or don't have access to it.

Even if you're curious, don't interrogate us. **It's not our job to educate you** and we may not feel like answering your incredibly personal questions right now. Unless we bring it up, don't ask us how our gender is affecting our personal relationships. For example, if you just met me, **don't ask me how my family is taking it.**

If you want to find out more about trans bodies or our families, educate yourself through books, websites, films, etc.

Out-ing

Trans people have a huge range of ways that we navigate the world, based on preference and necessity. Transphobia functions very differently than homophobia; being 'out' is not necessarily desirable or possible for us. Being a trans ally means supporting people in being more safe and healthy – which may mean anything between letting everyone they meet know they are trans, to keeping their gender history entirely confidential. It's crucial to support people in being as 'out', or not, as they need to be.

There are many situations in which being 'out' could have serious negative repercussions; trans people are killed every year just because other people find out they are trans. Revealing someone's trans status could cost them a job, a relationship, or their physical safety.

Many trans people are perceived 100% of the time as their preferred gender, and no one would ever suspect they had been through a gender transition at some point. Some of these folks prefer never to be 'out' as trans and, in fact, may not even consider themselves 'trans.' This is a completely valid choice among the huge spectrum of gender diversity. If you know someone who's trans experience is completely private, respect them by honoring that privacy.

Do not assume that just because you know us in one way, that we are able to, or choose to, live that way in every other part of our lives. Some of us express our gender in different ways in different parts of our lives. For example, we may not be able to find work as the gender we truly are. Or we may only find peace by living some of the time in a more masculine gender and some of the time as more feminine.

For myself, even though I hate being called "she," if someone refers to me that way, I might or might not correct them depending on many variables: whether I'm going to have to see them again, how confident I feel, who I'm with, how much backup I have, etc.

Think about when and why you ‘out’ someone as trans. Are you talking about your ‘trans friend’ just to prove how open and hip you are? Is it necessary to out this person, or are you doing it for your own personal reasons?

Names

Names are very powerful things. For a lot of trans people, the names given to us by our parents represent a gender identity which was wrong, humiliating and forced. Changing our names carries a lot more weight than it does for cisgender people. Don’t ask someone what their old name was. And don’t ask if our current names are our ‘given names’, or worse yet, ‘real names.’ If someone wants you to know, they will tell you. If you know someone’s old name, don’t share it with other people.

Some trans people go by multiple names, because they are in transition, or because they prefer it that way. Again, don’t trip about it. Just ask them what they prefer to be called and then call them that, every time. It may seem strange to you, but it’s completely normal for us.

Also, don’t make comments about the gender associations of trans people’s names. This is especially annoying in a cross-cultural context. A name that means (or sounds like) ‘Badass warrior king’ in one language, might mean (or sound like) ‘Nellie flower picker’ in another. Don’t assume that you know what meanings or gender implications our names have.

Transition

Don’t assume that our gender transitions are linear, one-way, or start or end at a fixed point. For example, some intersex people³ have trans experiences, and may also identify as trans. Some trans people, for example, may express themselves as masculine, feminine and then back to masculine. In an ideal world this would be no different than having long hair, then short hair, then long again.

There are infinite ways to transition. Things like binding, packing, tucking, electrolysis, hormones, surgery, or changing our name, legal ‘sex’ and pronoun, are some of the possible steps of a gender transition. **Trans people have the right to make all, some or none of these changes, and in any order.**

Do not ask us if we are sure, or remind us that our transition is irreversible and that we may regret our changes. Do not tell us we are coming out as trans just to be ‘trendy’. We have usually been thinking about and dealing with our gender issues for a long time, although

3 People born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t fit the typical definitions of female or male.

we may not have shared our years of internal torment with you. We are aware of, and probably very excited about, the consequences of our decisions.

Don't tell us how you liked us (or certain things about us) better before

we transitioned. There is a normal and healthy grieving process that people go through around any major change, including gender changes by people in our lives. It's important to acknowledge and deal with your feelings, but not with us. We are going through enough stress, and we really just need your support.

Do not tell us how hard this is for you

or how uncomfortable we make you. However challenging it may feel to you, it's much harder to live as a trans person. Many many people become amazing trans allies and effortlessly call all their trans friends by the right names and pronouns. You can too, its really not that hard – its just a different way of thinking about gender. If you are uncomfortable with someone's gender, find ways to work on it yourself or with other, knowledgeable non-trans friends.

Passing⁴ and being passed

Don't judge our ability to be seen as male or female. For example, don't say: "Maybe if you did_____, or didn't do _____, you'd pass better, and we would be able to accept your gender better." Also, it is not always appropriate to compliment people on how well they pass. Whether or not we are passed as the gender we prefer is often a matter of money and genetics, not desire or determination. We are not all seeking to pass in the same ways, for the same reasons, or at all! These comments are divisive to trans communities. They reinforce straight, binary gender standards by labeling certain traits (and people) as 'good' and 'real'.

Fetishization/Tokenization

Yes, it's true, trans people are all incredibly sexy in our own unique individual ways, but don't fetishize and tokenize us. Don't tell us how you love trans men because they were socialized female and therefore we aren't like "real men." While this may be true for some individuals, trans men are just as diverse as any other group. Many trans men identify as "real men" who are just as (or more) masculine than people assigned male at birth. Don't tell us how trans women are the ideal sex partners because they are "chicks with dicks."

⁴ In this context, 'passing' refers to trans people being perceived as non-trans members of the gender with which they identify. While this is a goal for most trans people, I think its important to stay aware of the systemic power imbalance that is implicit in this term. I prefer the term 'being passed,' because it emphasizes the fact that trans people do not have total control over how we are perceived, and that the power in the equation of passing lies completely with the non-trans person who 'passes' us. It is something done to us, not something we are able to control.

Don't expect any one of us to speak for all trans people. Don't assume that you know about trans issues because you once knew a trans person. If we are offended by something you do, listen, apologize and reflect – don't excuse your bad behavior by saying that your other trans friend didn't mind. Don't showcase us as tokens of diversity in your social circle or annual report, without being a real friend or truly integrating trans people into your organization.

Transphobia + sexism + racism + classism = a big slimy mess

It is a stereotype that all trans people are sexist: that all trans women are still “really men” and still have male privilege, and that all trans men are becoming men because of their internalized sexism. Trans people can be sexist towards ourselves and others, but we are not any more or less sexist than non-trans people. It is not inherently sexist to be trans.

Similarly and unfortunately, trans communities are just as racist, classist, etc. as the rest of the world, but not more so. And these dynamics play out in particular ways among transpeople. Just like some people will tell you all gay people are white, some people believe that all trans people are white, and that being trans is just a privilege of white people. Of course it is easier to be trans (or anything actually) if you are white and have money, but most gender-variant and trans people are working-class and poor people of color, because most people in the world are poor and working-class people of color. Being trans is not inherently racist or classist.

Age

Don't be surprised if you or others radically misread a trans person's age. It may be amazing to you, but we are used to it, and probably over it. Many trans people who were coercively assigned female at birth (CAFAB) may look much younger than they are, especially if they are not on hormones, are on a low dose of hormones, or are just starting hormones. Because of this, we may experience some of the effects of adultism, such as not being taken seriously, getting carded all the time, and being condescended to. Some CAMAB people may look older to you than they are, and experience the effects of sexism, like being treated as less important because they aren't seen as young and pretty.

Fascinating trans movies/current events/TV shows/etc. etc...

It is really important for people to educate themselves about different experiences of oppression, however, someone who has had to deal with that oppression all the time may not want to hear about it, or process how hard it was for you, as someone not directly affected by it. For example, when the movie “Boys Don't Cry” came out, many many people every day took it upon themselves to try and discuss it with me, ask me if I've seen it, explain how tragic it was and how hard it was for them to watch as a non-trans person. We have to deal with transphobia **all the time** and so we don't always want to talk about it. Check yourself before

you bring up the ten latest, most horrifying transphobic things you heard yesterday – your trans friend may actually not want to re-experience them with you. If you want to discuss a movie, book, current event or experience that relates to trans issues, bring it up with another cisgender person. If a trans person wants to discuss it with you, they'll bring it up.

“Extra letter” Syndrome

Gay and lesbian organizations all over the country have added a token ‘T’ to their names, without doing anything to include trans people or issues in their organizations. Although queer issues and trans struggles are linked (don't forget who rioted at Stonewall), they are very different. For example, access to transition-related medical care (such as hormones and surgery), and issues of legal identification (such as changing our names and ‘sex’) are huge struggles faced by trans people, but are non-issues for gay and lesbian people. As mentioned above, being “out” which is desirable in many GLBQ spaces (especially white, middle-class ones), is not a goal of many trans people. Issues around sexual orientation are fundamentally different than the those of gender, so don't assume you are serving us at all by just adding a “T” on the end of your acronym.

Recognize your own gender uniqueness and how transphobia affects you, but don't speak for trans people. Also recognize that within trans communities, not only is each individual's experience different, but each group of individuals' experience is different from other groups. Just as you probably wouldn't (or shouldn't) ask a gay man to explain lesbian issues, you shouldn't lump all trans people together, because we all have unique experiences and perspectives. For example, African American transsexual issues are different from disabled genderqueer issues, which are different from Latin@ drag king issues, and so on. Also, most indigenous cultures have non-binary gender systems, and many of us identify with our culturally-specific gender identities (such as two-spirit, hijra, timtum, fa'afafine, etc.) that may overlap with, but are distinct from being ‘trans.’

GOOD THINGS!

There are so many positive things you can do to be ally to trans people, even if you do not have that much experience with trans communities.

Start with being honest about how much you know, or don't know. It is refreshingly wonderful to hear someone say: "Actually, I don't know anything about trans people. I want to support you and respect you, so please forgive my ignorance. I'm going to start educating myself." Almost all of us started out ignorant of trans issues – even trans people! The important thing is to pro-actively learn more once you become aware.

Educate yourself and take action!

- Look at books, websites, films.
- Talk to other cisgender people who know more than you do.
- Start an unlearning transphobia group with other non-trans friends.
- Help write a non-discrimination policy for your school or workplace that protects gender identity and expression.
- Pay some trans folks to do an educational presentation for your group or organization.
- Especially if you work in a school, faith-based organization, governmental agency, or a social justice, social services or healthcare organization, try to integrate trans-inclusive policies and services.
- Work to create bathrooms that are accessible for all genders (for example, single-stall gender-neutral bathrooms)
- Think critically about your own gender and your participation in the binary gender system.
- Reflect on how you can be a better ally to trans people.

Once you have educated yourself, educate other cisgender people about transphobia. This is so needed and appreciated! There have been so many times when people said offensive things to me when I wished I had an ally to refer them to. Trans people shouldn't have to do all the work. Besides, even though there are way more of us than you think, there aren't enough of us to educate all the hordes and hordes of cisgender people in the world. Also, it's a lot harder for us to do this work, because we are more vulnerable. Helping someone unlearn transphobia usually involves hearing and sorting through a lot of hurtful crud while people sort out their feelings about gender.

Interrupt transphobic behavior. This is also usually easier for a cisgender person to do, because they are not making themselves as personally vulnerable or a target for retaliation.

For example, correcting other people when they refer to someone by the wrong pronoun is very important. When introducing people, it is good etiquette to clue them in beforehand about the language preferred by any trans people who are present. By this I don't mean outing any trans people who would prefer not to be out, but letting people know how to refer to anyone who might not 'pass.' Simply saying things like, "I'm a lady, he's a guy," or "that's none of your business," or "actually, her voice/body/manner is perfect the way it is, and I don't want to hear another comment about it," can save the day.

Above all, talk to your trans friends, listen and educate yourself. If you are not sure how to best support someone, ask them. If you are not ready to support someone in the way that they need, don't pretend that you are, just figure out what you need to do to get there. Starting to be an ally doesn't require you to be an expert, just be honest with yourself and take some risks.

Remember:

Gender is a universe and we are all stars.

Transphobia limits and oppresses all of us.

By becoming an ally, you'll not only have the satisfaction of doing the right thing, you'll get to experience your true starry brilliance.