

What is a pronoun and why do they matter?

Pronouns are words that replace nouns in a sentence, such as “you,” “we,” or “they.” Most of the time we use pronouns without giving them a second thought. But when we’re working with people from all gender identities and gender expressions, it is important to consider our use of gender specific pronouns. Pronouns are part of a person’s identity, just like names are. It’s important that like a name, we take the time to learn preferred pronouns rather than making assumptions about how to refer to people in conversation or writing. While it may be our habit to refer to everyone as “he” or “she” based on appearances, we need to recognize that gender is a spectrum, and no one can assume a person’s gender or a person’s preferred pronouns based on their appearance.

What are some pronoun sets and what do they mean?

He/him/his

These pronouns can refer to people who identify as boys or men but are not limited to male people. While he can be an affirming pronoun for some people, we can’t assume that all people who appear to be masculine or affirm a male identity and use he/him/his pronouns.

She/her/hers

Like the he/him/his set, she/her/hers refer to people who identify as girls or women but are not limited to female people. Likewise, we can’t assume that all people we assume who appear to be feminine use or affirm female identity and use she/her/hers pronouns.

They/them/their

In addition to its use as a plural pronoun, they/them/their has a rich history of use as a gender-neutral singular pronoun in the English language. The Oxford English Dictionary sources the singular they as far back as 1375. They is often used in reference to a singular person whose gender pronouns are unknown, such as in the sentences “Someone left their umbrella here. How can we find out who they are?” or “I’m not sure what their pronouns are. I should ask them next time.” It’s also very important to honor that some people specifically use they/them/their pronouns instead of he or she to represent their identity outside of the gender binary.

Ze/hir/hirs, ze/zir/zirs

The ze/hir, ze/zir pronoun sets come from the trans community as another gender-neutral pronoun set. It’s up to each individual to decide which pronoun best fits them and their identities. Ze is typically pronounced like the letter Z. Hir is typically pronounced like the word “here.” Zir is typically pronounced like “here” with a z in front.

Just use my name!

Like identities, pronouns can be complex and fluid. Some people don't use pronouns, some people use different pronouns in different settings, and sometimes we forget to ask for pronouns or aren't comfortable doing so. It's appropriate to use the name a person shares with you.

How do I ask for a person's pronouns?

Just ask! Rather than assume someone's pronouns, ask them how they like to be addressed. Like a name, we can't know how to best respect a person in conversation without introductions. Introduce yourself with your own pronouns to open the door for others to feel comfortable sharing their name and pronouns with you too. A phrase you might use is "My name is [your name] and I use the pronouns [your pronouns]. What are the names and/or pronouns that you prefer?"

Also know that it's okay if a person does not want to share their pronouns with you. Make sure that you don't force someone to share their pronouns--especially in a public space. If you are unsure of someone's preferred pronouns and they haven't shared them with you to be certain, just use their name.

What if I make a mistake?

Navigating new ways in which to address people can be difficult. If you make a mistake, apologize as soon as you recognize your error, politely correct it and move forward. Continuing to mis-gender someone, however, can be harmful. Here are few steps to keep in mind:

- **Realize your impact.** You may hurt someone by mis-gendering or possibly outing them in a public setting. Focus on how you can support the person you mis-gendered.
- **Apologize.** Remember not to out someone in public apology. Sometimes a quick apology is most appropriate.
- **Follow up in private if necessary.** Remember it's not about making yourself feel better but identifying ways to support a person who you may have unintentionally disrespected and hurt. Ask them if they need anything from you and share your plans to getting their pronouns right.
- **Commit to correcting your behavior.** Practicing a person's pronouns out loud in a private setting is a helpful strategy for changing the language you use. If you need to practice pronouns with a safe person, you're welcome to reach out to the Health Equity staff as a resource. This can be helpful especially when needing to utilize the they or ze pronouns as they are not as natural as using gender specific pronouns in everyday speech.
- **Move forward.** Breaking your habits may take some time but focus on why it's important to get a person's pronouns and names right. You may also find that if you mis-gender a person, they may want space from you. Respect what they need and commit yourself to the inclusive practices you value.