LGBT Alphabet Soup – Terms and Definitions

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**Sexual Orientation:** A person’s physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another person.

**Sexual History and/or Sexual Behavior:** A person’s sexual history and past behavior. This can include whether a person has sex with men, women, or both, as well as the sexual behaviors in which this person has engaged in the past, such as oral, anal and/or vaginal sex.

A person’s sexual behavior may not or may not align with a person’s sexual orientation. For example, a woman may identify as a lesbian (a woman who is attracted to other women), but may have previously had sexual relationships with men. Read more about the difference between sexual orientation and sexual behavior.

**Gay:** A man who is physically and romantically, as well as emotionally, attracted to other men. Sometimes, this term is used generally to describe a person (male or female) who is attracted to members of the same sex.

**Lesbian:** A woman who is physically and romantically, as well as emotionally, attracted to other women.

**Bisexual:** A person who is physically and romantically, as well as emotionally, attracted to both men and women.

**Queer:** A term that has historically been used in a derogatory way, “queer” has been reclaimed as an umbrella term by some members of the LGBT community. When an LGBT person uses the word queer, it generally refers to nonheterosexual, noncisgender (see below) identities. This word should be avoided unless a person self-identifies as queer.

**Sex:** A categorization of a person as male or female. At birth, infants are assigned a sex – male or female – based on bodily characteristics such as chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive organs and genitalia.

**Gender Identity:** A person’s internal sense or identity of being a man or a woman.

Cisgender people have a gender identity that matches their birth assigned sex (for example, a person assigned female at birth who identifies as a woman).
Transgender people have a gender identity that does not match their birth assigned sex (for example, a person assigned female at birth who identifies as a man).

**Gender Expression:** The external expression of a person’s gender identity. This may be expressed through masculine or feminine appearance (haircut and clothing, for example) or behavior.

**Transgender:** An umbrella term used for people whose gender identity is different from their sex assigned at birth. The word “transgender” may include people who are transsexual, gender queer, gender variant and gender nonconforming. Transgender people may or may not have medically changed their bodies through hormones and/or surgery.

**Transsexual:** An older term used to describe people who have medically transitioned from one gender to another. This term is grounded in medical and psychological communities. While some people still claim and use the word transsexual, many people prefer to use the term transgender rather than transsexual.

**Intersex:** A term used to describe a person whose biological sex is ambiguous. Genetic, hormonal, and or anatomical variations may make a person’s biological sex ambiguous, such as Klinefelter’s Syndrome. “Intersex” and “transgender” are not synonymous, as intersex refers to a person’s biological sex, while transgender refers to a person’s gender identity.

Generally, parents and medical care providers assign an intersex infant a sex at birth and perform operations in order to have the infant’s body align with that sex. However, this practice and process is becoming increasingly controversial and challenged.

**Asexual:** A term used to describe a lack of sexual attraction and/or a lack of interest in engaging in sex. Asexuality is considered a sexual orientation, and thus describes a person with an enduring lack of sexual attraction or desire for sex.

**Celibacy:** A life-long vow to remain unmarried and abstain from sex. While celibacy and abstinence are often used interchangeably, they have different connotations. Abstinence usually refers to abstaining from all sexual activity for a defined period of time, such as until marriage.

**Gender queer and/or Gender nonconforming:** An umbrella term used to describe all gender identities that fall outside of “man” and “woman.” People who are gender queer may identify as both a man and a woman (bigender), neither a man nor a woman (genderless), moving between genders (gender fluid), or third gendered or other gendered (besides man or woman).
**Gender fluid:** A term used to describe a person whose gender identity is a dynamic mix of man and woman. A gender fluid person may feel a mix of both genders, but may experience some days feeling more like a man on some days, and more like a woman on other days. Gender fluidity does not reflect or affect a person’s sexual orientation or biology.