

# Our Evolving Use of Pronouns



Anyone mistakenly being called “sir” when considering themselves a “ma’am” – or vice versa – will experience an emotional reaction...confusion, defensiveness, or maybe anger. Being addressed in a manner at odds with our sense of self does not compute in our brain; it instinctively elicits uncomfortable feelings.

The use of pronouns is a common and helpful part of communication. It is an abbreviated way of referring to someone without having to repeatedly use their name. Pronouns such as “me, myself and I” are how people talk about themselves. People use pronouns “you, she, he and they” to talk about others. However, traditionally a pronoun in the English language requires assuming whether an individual is male or female. This assumption is based upon appearance, tone of voice and affect. Is this “one or the other” binary approach accurate?

Many people do not feel exclusively male or female. Our understanding of gender identity and expression has come to recognize that concepts of masculinity and femininity exist on a spectrum. But what is gender identity? It is a person’s emotional and psychological sense of their own gender. A gender neutral or gender inclusive pronoun does not associate a gender with the person being discussed.

The English language is slowly integrating gender neutral pronouns into words people use every day. Personal pronouns are used to convey gender identity but don’t necessarily align with the sex assigned to an individual at birth. Third-person singular pronouns express how someone wants to be referred to by others. Common third-person singular pronouns are “she/her/hers” and “he/him/his”. “They/them” can similarly be used to reference a single individual, as can gender-inclusive pronouns like “ze/hir”.

It may seem strange to use the plural pronoun “they/them” when talking about a singular person. Surprisingly, “they” has been used this way for 600 years in the English language. In 2019 the Merriam-Webster Dictionary updated the definition of the word “they” by noting it can be used as a nonbinary pronoun; it was also named “Word of the Year”.

It is important to address someone using their chosen pronoun to show respect for them as a person. Assuming gender identity by using the wrong pronoun can make someone feel invalidated, dismissed, and disrespected. The most basic way to convey respect is to ask someone what pronoun they use and then use it correctly.

*Written by Jill Hoag, LPC and Judith Tegge, LPC, Advocate Aurora Employee Assistance Program*

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## Things to Consider:

- Opinions and preferences regarding pronouns are unique to every individual. There is no “right” or “best” way to address the use of pronouns.

**Example:** People who know their pronouns may like to be asked; others may be confused or offended. Be respectful and patient.

- Reactions will differ based on how close someone feels to the person addressing pronouns with them.

**Example:** Inaccurate pronoun use by an acquaintance may have less meaning than by a parent; personal questions by a stranger may feel intrusive whereas by a close friend may feel validating.

- Underlying intent, feelings, attitudes tend to send the loudest message when talking about pronouns.

**Example:** Addressing pronouns using a sarcastic voice verses a curious, caring tone will be received differently.

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