



Action Tips for Accomplices to Trans People

The following are several actions tips that you can use to be a better accomplice to trans people. Of course, this list is not exhaustive and cannot include all the “right” things to do or say—because each person and situation is different, there is not always one single, easy, or right answer! This list should provide you with a starting place as you learn more about how to support trans people and communities.

What’s an accomplice?

An accomplice is a re-frame of the term ally- an accomplice follows the lead and decisions of the community they are supporting through action. They may risk their own power or status in various ways to do this support.

Don’t assume you can tell if someone is trans or cis.

Trans and cis people don’t all look a certain way or come from the same background, and people may not fit your idea of what trans or cis “looks like.”

Don’t make assumptions about a trans person’s sexuality.

Gender identity is distinct from sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is about who we’re attracted to. Gender identity is about how we know our own gender. Trans people can identify as any sexual orientation, such as gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, or straight.

Be careful about confidentiality, disclosure, and “outing.”

Some trans people feel comfortable disclosing their gender history to others, and some do not. Knowing a trans person’s identity is personal information. Do not casually share this information, or “gossip” about a person you know or think is trans. Not only is this an invasion of privacy, it also can have negative consequences and compromise safety in a world that is very intolerant of gender difference—

trans people can lose jobs, housing, family, or friends due to unwanted outing, and sadly many trans people, especially trans women of color, have been killed upon revelation of their gender history.

Understand what is unique about coming out as trans.

Unlike coming out in a lesbian/gay/bisexual context, where the act of disclosing one’s sexuality reveals a “truth” about that person’s sexual orientation, disclosing one’s trans identity often has the opposite effect. That is, when a person comes out as trans, the listener often assumes the “truth” about the trans person is that they are somehow more fundamentally a member of their gender assigned at birth. In other words, sometimes coming out makes it more difficult for a trans person to be fully recognized as their authentic self.

Do not tolerate anti-trans remarks or humor in public spaces.

Consider strategies to best confront anti-trans remarks or jokes in your classroom, lab, office, living group, or organization. Seek out other accomplices who will support you in this effort.

If you don’t know what language to use, ask.

Be polite and respectful when you ask a person which name and pronouns they use. Then, use that name/pronoun and encourage others to do so. Hold others accountable when they





misgender that person, even accidentally. A person who is questioning their gender identity might use different language at different times or in different contexts. They might, for example, choose a new name or pronoun, and then decide at a later time to change the name or pronoun again. Be respectful and use the person's name and pronouns as requested.

Don't tell a person how to identify.

Do not apply labels or identities to a person that they have not chosen for themselves. If a person is not sure of which identity or path fits them best, give them the time and space to decide for themselves.

Don't assume what path a trans person is on regarding transition, and don't privilege one path over another.

Affirm the many ways all of us can and do transcend gender boundaries, including the choices some of us make to use medical technology to change our bodies. Some trans people wish to be recognized as their authentic self without surgery or hormones; some need support and advocacy to get respectful healthcare, hormones, and/or surgery. Every trans person knows their needs best.

Don't ask a trans person about their gender history.

A trans person may choose to tell you their story, but you are not entitled to it. For some trans people, being associated with their birth name (often called their "deadname") is a tremendous source of anxiety, or it is simply a part of their life they wish to leave behind. Respect the name a trans person is currently using.

Don't ask about a trans person's body or sex life. Think about it—it wouldn't be appropriate to ask a cis person about their genitalia or other questions about their body, so it isn't

appropriate to ask a trans person either. Similarly, it wouldn't be appropriate to ask a cis person about how they have sex, so the same respect should be extended to trans people.

Don't police public restrooms.

Everyone has the right to use a restroom they feel comfortable in. Hold your local schools, businesses and agencies accountable to have full restroom options, including all-gender and fully accessible restrooms.

Don't just add the "T" without doing work.

"LGBTQ" is a common acronym that joins lesbian, bisexual, gay, trans, and queer communities under one umbrella. To be an accomplice to trans people, cis people of all sexualities need to examine their own assumptions about gender and their own prejudices about trans people, and be willing to defend and celebrate trans lives. Know your own limits as a cis person. No matter how knowledgeable you may be about gender, there's a critical difference between abstract knowledge and experiential knowledge. When a trans person has sought you out for support or guidance, try to find appropriate resources when you've reached the limit of your knowledge or ability to handle the situation. It is better to admit you don't know something than to provide information that may be incorrect or harmful.

Listen to trans people (especially when you feel uncomfortable).

The best way to be an accomplice is to listen with an open mind to trans people themselves. We are the experts on our own lives! Get to know trans people in your community. Consult the Resource Library, the GSCC, and other resources to learn more directly from trans activists.

Adapted from the trans@mit Allies Toolkit, "Action Tips for Allies of Trans People." March 31, 2006. web.mit.edu/trans/tipsfortransallies.pdf.

