

Transcript

Module 8: Nonbinary People and Respecting Them

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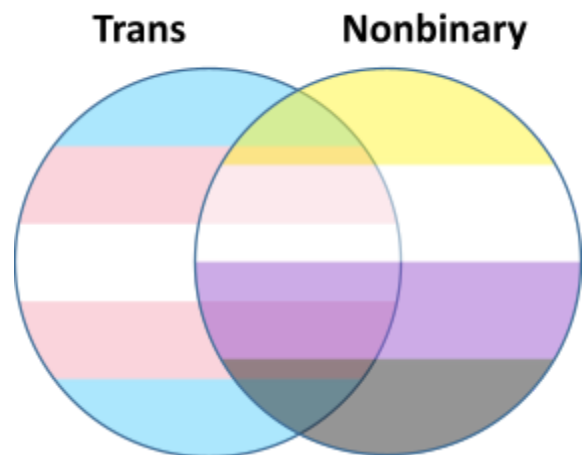
Hey GSA's! I'm Stacy, my pronouns are they/them, and earlier in this series (Module 5) we talked about trans people, who we are, and how to respect us. Well, now, we're going to talk specifically about nonbinary people, who we are, and how to respect us. Let's start off with what it means!

***nonbinary** (adj.) to not be binary.*

That's it! When presented with the binary options of man or woman, any response apart from "100% man" and "100% woman" is nonbinary, including "99% man"; "woman, but not quite"; "both man and woman"; and "neither"! That's right, nonbinary is one of the broadest, most general categories that can be used to describe humans in Western society. Now, a clarification:

Let's ditch last decade's stone-cold takes about umbrella metaphors and make it simple and easy to understand with a Venn diagram! The people who identify with the word "trans" are in the trans circle, and the people who identify with the word "nonbinary" are in the nonbinary circle—and as you can see, there is considerable overlap. Now,

because the only requirement for being trans is not fully identifying with your assigned sex at birth, you might think this means that **all** nonbinary people are trans because they fall under the definition, but the truth is, **the word "trans" just doesn't resonate with a lot of nonbinary people**. You can throw as many definitions as you want at it, but at the end of the day, it just doesn't work for some people. Some people are just nonbinary, including in the sense



that they're neither trans nor cis. Every one of them will have a different reason for not identifying with the word "trans", but, really, the most important thing that you all know is that there's variety. So, we'll be saying "trans **and/or** nonbinary". Okay? Okay.

Even if you don't know any nonbinary people apart from me, chances are you've heard a couple of things about what it means to be nonbinary, and I'd be willing to bet that some of those things are damaging and less than accurate. So, call me Jamie Hyneman cause we're about to do some Mythbusting! (...and I just dated myself with that reference.)

- Okay. True or false? *You don't need dysphoria to be trans and/or nonbinary.* What do you think?
 - This one's actually **true!** ✓ You don't need it. It doesn't matter what your gender is, dysphoria is not a requirement to be trans, nonbinary, or both. You don't need it! You don't need to suffer to be a part of the club, and those who say otherwise belong to the **transmedicalist** ideology, which pathologizes transness to the detriment of everyone. When a medical or psychological test is used to gatekeep transness, it forces everyone to conform to a very cis notion of what it means to be trans. There are still places out there where you can be denied care as a transfeminine person if you don't present in the most stereotypically over-the-top feminine way possible. Transmedicalism just doesn't leave room for anyone outside the two stereotypical gender expression extremes, and that is exactly why we don't endorse it.
- What about this one—true or false? *You can be nonbinary and use she/her or he/him pronouns.*
 - This one's also **true!** ✓ Remember, pronouns and gender are two different things. Binary people can use they/them, ze/hir, xe/xym, or any number of non-traditional pronouns if that's what resonates with them. Nonbinary people can use she/her or he/him if that's what resonates with them, and none of these things are at odds with each other! It's a matter of comfort in your identity, and if using he/him is what feels most comfortable to your nonbinary self then that's that!

- Okay, true or false? *Nonbinary people have to be androgynous, otherwise they're not nonbinary.*
 - This one's **false**. ☐ So what's the truth? **Expression does not equal gender.** There are no expression requirements to be nonbinary. Once again, expression and gender are two different things, just like pronouns and gender.
- True or false? *Nonbinary is just "woman lite."*
 - This one's **false**. ☐ Nonbinary encompasses a **wide variety of genders and expressions**—remember, it's **one of the broadest, most general categories** that you can put a human into in Western society.
 - Just as an aside, I can see why some people believe this, because it seems like some of the most visible nonbinary people are also those assigned female at birth, but to conflate assigned sex with gender betrays the fundamental notion of what it means to be trans. So, recognize that pattern of thinking when it pops into your mind. I'm assigned male and I'm nonbinary, just... if you need that little... extra dose of representation.
- Okay. True or false? *You can't tell whether someone is nonbinary unless they tell you.*
 - That one's **true!** ✓ I am trans and nonbinary myself and even I can't tell if someone's trans or nonbinary just by looking at them. You cannot tell based on appearance, and to say that you can plays into the hands of gender essentialism, which is another ideology that I'm not a big fan of.
- Okay, last one! True or false? *Nonbinary people have to transition to a "middle ground."*
 - That one's **false**. ☐ The truth is that, like binary trans people, **nonbinary people don't have to undergo a physical transition, but some of them do! And those transitions can really look like anything.** From the outside, I had a transition that very much resembled a "binary" transition, but that's not what it was. I'm still nonbinary, through and through.

Okay, we've cleared up a few things about what it means to be nonbinary now. But why is this important? Why do we have to know all this? Why is it

important that we know how to interact with and respect our nonbinary peers? Well, **nonbinary folks get erased, like, all the time.** According to the 2015 US Transgender Survey, **44%** of nonbinary people usually just let others assume that they're a man or woman when that assumption is made about them. Imagine if we were talking about a binary man or woman who didn't speak up when someone got their gender wrong. It'd be ridiculous! But because nonbinary folks like me are erased from systems of categorization, like ID's, patient forms, and everyday phrases like "ladies and gentlemen", nobody really even bats an eye. To be outside a binary is to be erased. To some people, we may as well not even exist. This is why bisexual people, by the way, also suffer a lot more abuse and anxiety: because they fall outside the false gay-straight binary.

In any case, you might be wondering what you can do to help. Lucky for you all, I've come up with another one of my lists, so, in no specific order, here are some ways that you can make life easier for your nonbinary friends, nonbinary acquaintances, and nonbinary people that you don't even know! **Some of the things from the trans module do apply here**, like "state your pronouns when you're introducing yourself", and, uh, "recognize that our past is ours, and our transness and/or nonbinaryness is confidential". That sort of stuff. Now here's what's different!

- 1. Recognize that a lot of us don't want to call attention to ourselves.**

This isn't true of all nonbinary people, least of all me—I love attention. But, as I stated earlier, nonbinary people get erased all the time. Many of us won't even speak up when people make incorrect assumptions about us, because we've been denied that agency through erasure. What this boils down to is that it's up to you to step up and correct yourself on your own before anything else. When someone else gets it wrong, that's more of a grey area. Nonbinary people experience being in or out of the closet in ways that binary people generally don't. A lot of us have one foot in and one foot out because we realize that there will be people who will be willfully ignorant of and invalidating towards our gender. The best bet is to talk to us, the nonbinary person in question, in private, making sure that you're doing what we want you to do. A lot of us would be mortified to have you correct someone on our pronouns in front of the whole room, while others, like myself, would really rather you do it than not.

2. **Use "they" if you don't know someone's pronoun, and use neutral terms if you don't know their gender.** This doesn't just apply if you think someone's nonbinary; this applies to all strangers, and all acquaintances whose pronouns you're unsure of. I feel like I'm gonna get a little bit of pushback on this one—some of you might be thinking, "really, Stacy? Everyone? Doesn't that seem a little bit extreme?" Well, when you know the reason behind it, it really doesn't! It doesn't matter if you **think** you know who they are, you can't tell someone's pronoun just by looking at them, unless they have a really cool pronoun badge on their top just like I do! To speak from experience, I'm at the age where a lot of people I knew in high school are starting to figure out that they/them pronouns really suit them the best. When I was in high school, I cringed every time someone referred to me using he/him pronouns, which was every day, mind you. Using "they" make the fewest assumptions about any given person, and we do it in passing all the time! I'll give you an example: you walk into an otherwise empty classroom and see a lone backpack sitting on a chair, and what do you say? "Someone left their backpack here." **Their** backpack! See? Give it a shot! It takes less time than you think to get adjusted to it, and you'll find that it really makes a difference in the way you conceive of gender in your mind. The nonbinary people who are part of your conversations or who are listening will thank you for it. To give one more example, I was downtown at a punk show one day, and I was outside getting some air, and one of the attendees walked up and said hi to me—probably didn't even know my name—and when their friend from the inside shouted for them to get back in, they said, "I'll be there in a minute, I'm talking to this really cool **person**." That made me feel like I was walkin' on air, and not just cause they thought I was cool.
3. **Acknowledge our existence with what you can control.** This is something I usually tell to middle-aged receptionists when I give presentations at healthcare conferences, but it can really apply to anyone! Maybe you can't control the wording of the forms at the doctor's office... okay, maybe you could if you unionized over it. But you **can** control the new character sheets at D&D night! You **can** control the forms of address you use for an audience instead of just using "ladies and gentlemen". You **can** use neutral terms when you're speaking generally about something, and something you can **absolutely** control is

the kind of media you consume! Do you read works by trans and/or nonbinary people? Do you watch films or TV shows with good trans and/or nonbinary representation? Do you follow trans and/or nonbinary people on social media? All of these things are a lot more important than you might think! For a group as erased as ours, this stuff goes pretty far. By being intentionally diverse with the media you consume, you not only acknowledge but uplift us, and you can learn a lot about what it means to be nonbinary even just from a simple follow on Twitter! Not like I would use this video as a shameless plug or anything.

(Follow me on Twitter @behsss.) Lastly,

4. **Don't ridicule what you don't know.** We're the butt of a lot of helicopter jokes and a lot of angry Twitter threads ranting about how they/them lesbians don't exist. (Spoiler alert: we do!) We're also the subject of a lot of fuss by people who think "xe" and "xym" are made-up words. Newsflash: every word is made up! Every single one! We made it up! How do you think we got started saying literally any slang word? The only reason why we say the word "OK" today in 2020 is because someone back in 1839 thought it'd be funny to misspell the word "all correct" on page 2 of the Boston Morning Post. If enough people use a string of letters or phonemes to mean a certain thing, then it just **is** a word. Did a lot of the non-traditional pronouns that we use today exist 100 years ago? Probably not—although, if you are interested in probably the oldest "nontraditional" pronoun, look up this history of "thon" (that's T-H-O-N)—but that doesn't mean that they're not words, because enough of us use them to mean a certain thing. And that's all you really need!

Look, you've probably learned at least one thing from this video about nonbinary people today, but if you're binary, there's probably a good chance that there's a lot of things you still don't know, and that's okay! As long as you don't make fun of people for a perceived difference, you'll be able to learn without limits. Not to sound like a cheesy educational video from the 90's or anything.

That's it, that—that's the whole video. Thanks for stickin' around. I hope you all have a great rest of your day!

Survey link: <https://tinyurl.com/mw9m6bd7>