

Decolonizing Gender

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Many historical accounts indicate that LGBTQ+ identities and relationships are timeless and universal. For example, Two-Spirit people and cultures. Two-Spirit is a term used by Native North Americans to describe gender-variant individuals, specifically people within indigenous communities who are seen as having male and female spirits within them (<https://ok2bme.ca/resources/kids-teens/what-does-lgbtq-mean/>).

Two-Spirit people were not considered to be in the binary of male or female, but celebrated for their unique gender, which was often referred to as a third and fourth gender. Historically, Two-Spirit people were valued and respected for their gender presentations, same-sex relationships and specialized skills (<https://www.ihs.gov/lgbt/health/twospirit/>).

So what are some causes for the dramatic shift towards our existing anti-LGBTQ+ society? Settler-colonialism and Capitalism in the United States marked the beginning of a violent genocide based on race, gender, sexuality and various other identities. Hetero-patriarchy attacked indigenous values and communities, forcing assimilation and in turn, the erasure of identity. Through a post-colonial model, gender has been weaponized to identify and exploit marginalized groups. Approaching gender and sexuality with decolonization, or the process of contesting and reframing narratives by those with historical privilege and power, is an important step in equalizing our society and making reparations.

Decolonizing gender takes many different forms, as it demands different outcomes. In part, it looks like solidarity in dismantling knowledge hierarchies, meaning, resisting the modern understandings of gender biases and constructs. By taking a look at the systems of oppression and domination that shape LGBTQ+ people's experiences, we can recenter their voices and create spaces that culturally affirm their identities (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09540253.2019.1596392>).

ALLYSHIP

During the holidays, many people in the LGBTQ community may experience heightened homophobia/transphobia as they gather with family members. Here are some ways you can support LGBTQ family members or bring the conversation home for the holidays.



1 BE AWARE OF THE LANGUAGE WE USE.

Names: Many LGBTQ+ and Two-Spirit people may use a different name than the one they were assigned at birth. Using someone's chosen name is a significant part in recognizing them for who they truly are.

Personal pronouns are the pronouns a person uses. Some common ones are She/Her/Hers, They/Them/Theirs and He/Him/His, although there are many more. You cannot tell what pronouns a person uses just by looking at them. Asking what their pronouns are, and sharing yours, is a good way to show that you respect their identity, and view them as they view themselves. (It is a good habit to ask everyone, not only those assumed to be LGBTQ+ or Two-Spirit)

Gender-inclusive terms are expressions that refrain from excluding certain identities. For example, using "partner" instead of "girlfriend" or "boyfriend".

Using incorrect language can make LGBTQ+ people feel dismissed, alienated or dysphoric*. Gender dysphoria is "an underlying and incessant disquiet or anxiety centred on the understanding that who you are is not reflected by the gender of your body. Gender dysphoria exists in at range of intensities from the mild and intermittent, to the permanent, demanding and disabling"

(<https://www.lgbt.cusu.cam.ac.uk/resources/trans/gender-dysphoria/>). Making an effort to use someone's appropriate pronouns, name and language in the presence

AND in the absence of LGBTQ+ people is important.

2 RESPECT BOUNDARIES AND CONSENT.

Being an ally means being a good listener, and paying attention to the needs and limits of LGBTQ+ people. Boundaries are emotional or physical barriers put in place to protect one's well-being. Asking for consent to touch or hug someone, even family, is a way to show you respect someone's body and boundaries. If someone is verbally indicating, or using body language to communicate that they do not want to discuss a particular subject (ex. Details about their identity or relationships), it is best to gracefully move on. Boundaries exist even when your LGBTQ+ friends/family are not present. For example, not disclosing private information about LGBTQ+ individuals without their consent, is necessary and can be important to their safety.

3 HOLD YOURSELF ACCOUNTABLE.

It is not your friend or family members' role to educate you on LGBTQ+/Two-Spirit identity or culture. While they may decide to share knowledge or their own experience with you, it is unfair to expect this kind of emotional labor. We all have a responsibility to call ourselves out or seek information on our own time.

4 MAKE SPACE FOR YOUR LGBTQ+ AND TWO-SPIRIT FRIENDS AND FAMILY.

If someone is making insensitive jokes towards your loved one or their identity, it is okay to point out that it is hurtful. It may also be helpful to speak with the impacted person about how they want you to support them so that way you are centering their needs and wishes. Include your friends and family in activities and conversations, everyone wants to be seen and welcome. For many, it is a privilege to not have to worry if people will use your correct name and pronouns or make assumptions on your identity based on what they perceive.

5 REMEMBER, WE ARE ALL LEARNING.

It is okay to make mistakes and slip-up, as long as you acknowledge and check yourself. If you happen to misgender or use an incorrect name, it is good practice to stop yourself, apologize if necessary and correct it(ex. "--I'm sorry, I meant to say [insert correct pronoun]). Keep in mind that no one individual is the spokesperson for their entire community, nor should they have all the answers. Relieving your LGBTQ+ or Two-Spirit friend/family member of that pressure can make them feel more comfortable.