

# Moving from Empathy to Active LGBTQIA+ Allyship



Let us be completely unambiguous: **Identifying as LGBTQ+, transgender, nonbinary, or gender-questioning is not a mental health condition or a mental illness.**

However, navigating a world that is not always accepting brings unique, systemic challenges. Strong clinical evidence reveals that members of this community face **significantly higher risks** for experiencing depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation due to the toll of chronic stigma and discrimination.

## The Impact of Minority Stress

Data collected by national mental health screeners highlights a stark reality regarding the environmental risk factors our LGBTQ+ neighbors face:

- **Adult Disparities:** LGBTQ+ adults are more than twice as likely as heterosexual adults to experience a mental health condition, while transgender individuals are nearly four times as likely as cisgender adults to experience psychological distress or a substance use disorder.
- **Youth Vulnerability:** LGBTQ+ youth are more than twice as likely to report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness than their heterosexual peers. High school students who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual are more than four times as likely to have attempted suicide compared to heterosexual students.
- **Acute Structural Hurdles:**
  - **Rejection:** 40% of LGBTQ+ adults have experienced rejection from a family member or close friend. Only 37% of LGBTQ+ youth report that their home is an affirming space.
  - **Homelessness:** Due to family rejection, LGBTQ+ youth face a 120% higher risk of experiencing homelessness, a risk that is disproportionately high among Black, Native American, and Alaska Native LGBTQ+ youth.
  - **Trauma:** Facing homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, or school bullying (reported by 86% of LGBTQ+ youth) contributes to a significantly heightened risk for PTSD.

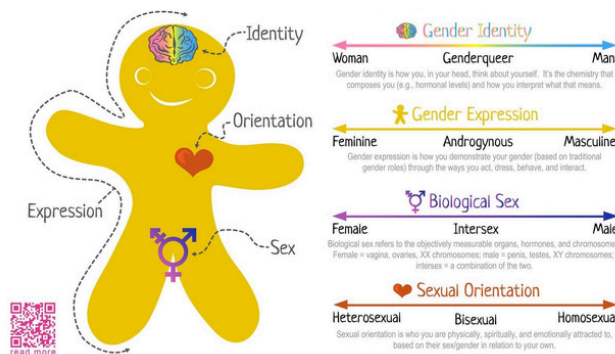
## Key Drivers of Psychological Distress

These elevated metrics are driven by three distinct systemic pressures:

- **Social Rejection & Isolation** —► Lack of acceptance from family, peers, or faith communities leads to profound loneliness
- **Systemic Bias & Discrimination** —► Denial of human rights, restrictive legislation, and daily microaggressions fuel chronic anxiety
- **Harassment & Overt Violence** —► Bullying (both online and in-person) creates traumatic stress and constant hypervigilance.

# Understanding the Language of Sexuality & Gender

To understand how to be a supportive ally, it helps to realize that identity is not a single concept. It is a beautiful combination of distinct traits. A wonderful tool for visualizing this is **The Genderbread Person**, which separates identity into four completely independent categories.



## 1. Gender Identity (Who You Know Yourself to Be)

This is a person's deeply felt, internal sense of their own gender. It is an internal experience of "man-ness," "woman-ness," both, or neither. For generations, Western society viewed gender through a strict binary lens (man/woman). In reality, gender is a complex social construct. Expanding beyond this binary allows individuals to express their authentic selves without rigid societal constraints.

- **Cisgender:** Someone whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.
- **Transgender:** An umbrella term for someone whose internal gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth.
  - **Non-Binary / Genderqueer:** Someone who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. They may feel like a blend of both, or experience no gender at all (Agender), or experience both distinctly (Bigender).
    - **Gender Fluid:** A type of non-binary identity where a person's internal sense of gender shifts and varies over time.

## 2. Gender Expression (How You Present Yourself)

This is how a person communicates their gender identity to the world. It is purely external and can be expressed through clothing, hairstyles, behavior, makeup, body language, voice, and the names and pronouns they use.

- **Expression vs. Identity:** Expression (masculine, feminine, androgynous) does not automatically equal identity. A person can dress in a masculine way without identifying as a man.
- **Pronouns Matter:** Pronouns (like he/him, she/her, they/them, ze/zir) are a key part of gender expression. Honoring them is a baseline act of respect and validation.

## 3. Biological Sex (The Physical Spectrum)

While society often treats biological sex as a strict male/female binary, human biology is actually a spectrum. Biological sex is made up of physical features, sex chromosomes, genes, and hormones.

- **Intersex / Differences of Sexual Development (DSDs):** Some individuals are born with natural variations in their chromosomes or hormone pathways, resulting in reproductive anatomy that doesn't fit typical male or female categories.

## 4. Sexual Orientation (Who You Love)

This is an inherent, immutable emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people. It includes how a person self-identifies (such as heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, pansexuality, or asexuality).

- **Completely Independent:** Sexual orientation is entirely separate from gender identity.
  - For example, a person can be a cisgender lesbian or a transgender lesbian. Their orientation is identical, regardless of their gender.

## Deepen Your Vocabulary

If you are navigating these terms for the first time or want to ensure your language is up to date, explore the complete **Human Rights Campaign Glossary of Terms** for clear, comprehensive definitions.





# Five Practical Steps for Allies

While these systemic challenges are vast, family and community acceptance acts as protective factors, dramatically lowering the risk of depression and suicide.



## Here is how you can actively foster mental wellness for the LGBTQ+ individuals in your life:

- 1. Validate Them Fully:** Because identity and orientation are internal, they are never up for debate. When someone shares who they are or who they love, believe them completely. Avoid treating it as a "phase."
- 2. Respect Names, Pronouns, & Labels:** Intentionally using a person's chosen name, correct pronouns, and preferred orientation labels (like bisexual or asexual) directly reduces psychological distress. If you slip up, simply correct yourself quickly and move on.
- 3. Follow Their Lead on Disclosure:** Let your loved one steer the timeline of their exploration. Let them decide who they come out to, when, and where. Never "out" someone without explicit permission.
- 4. Embrace Evolving Journeys:** Self-discovery is a dynamic process. Individuals may try out different names, presentation styles, or orientation labels as they figure out what feels authentic. Embrace their evolution with patience.
- 5. Prioritize Spatial Safety:** Be highly aware of where your loved one is out. They may feel safe using their chosen name or talking about their partner at home, but might need you to use their legal name or assigned pronouns at school, work, or around certain family members to protect their physical or economic safety.

## Access Free LGBTQIA+ Mental Health Resources

If you or an LGBTQ+ loved one are struggling in silence, experiencing acute distress, or having thoughts of self-harm, please reach out immediately.

### Specialized, identity-affirming support is always available:

- **The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** Call or text 988. It is free, confidential, and available 24/7.
  - Press 3 to be automatically routed to specialized LGBTQ+ crisis counselors.
- **The Trevor Project:** Dedicated crisis intervention for LGBTQ+ young people under 25.
  - Call: 1-866-488-7386 | Text: Text START to 678-678
- **Trans Lifeline:** A confidential peer-support hotline run entirely by trans individuals for trans and questioning peers.
  - Call: 877-565-8860

