



Tip of the Month June 2025

A Quick Guide to Names and Pronouns When Working With Transgender Clients

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As a VLN volunteer, you may work with clients who are transgender. This Tip of the Month is designed to be a quick guide to help you interact with clients respectfully and confidently. You don't need to be an expert in gender identity. You just need to be thoughtful, open-minded, and willing to learn! Using the correct name and pronouns is a way to show our clients that we see them, respect them, and are here to help without judgment.

My client is transgender. What does that mean?

Being transgender means that a person's gender identity differs from the gender they were assigned at birth. That identity can have a multitude of personal meanings to each individual.

For example: Dylan was declared female at birth. As he grew up, he realized he is a man. Dylan is a transgender man.

What are pronouns?

Pronouns are words that are used to refer to people, places, things, or ideas without repeating their names throughout conversation. *She, he, they, it, you, me, this, that, those, someone, and anyone* are all examples of pronouns. We all use pronouns in everyday communication.

Personal pronouns— such as *she, he, they, you, me, and we*— are especially important when talking about people. These pronouns reflect how we see ourselves and how we recognize others. Using the correct personal pronouns for someone is respectful.

Some people use pronouns such as *ze/zir, xe/xim*, which are referred to as neopronouns. For example, "My friend Zander told me the zier job was giving zir a raise!" Some people don't use

pronouns at all and would like to be referred to by name-only. “Gram said Gram needed to visit Gram’s house real quick.”

Understanding the importance of pronouns especially crucial when discussing with and referring to transgender individuals. When you refer to someone using the pronouns that align with their gender identity, such as calling a transgender woman by her pronouns of *she/her*, you’re acknowledging that she is a woman. On the other hand, *intentionally* using the wrong pronouns— such as calling her *he*— is deeply disrespectful and harmful. Intentionally using incorrect pronouns sends a clear message that you don’t see the client for who they are and that you may not be someone they can fully trust or feel safe with.

What is a deadname?

When working with transgender clients, the term “deadname” may come up from your client as you work with legal documents. “Deadname” refers to a person’s given name at birth that they no longer use.

Here’s an example: Jenna is a transgender woman. When she was born, her parents named her James. She is seeking help with VLN for an eviction expungement. Jenna’s legal documents still note her name as “James”. “James” is Jenna’s deadname.

Here’s another helpful example: Alex is nonbinary. They are neither a man nor woman. When Alex was born, their parents named them, well, Alex! They are seeking help through VLN to change their legal gender marker to “x”. Since their name hasn’t changed, Alex has no deadname.

It’s important not to refer to your client by their deadname in conversation, even if it appears on their legal documents. That said, you may need to use the legal name when completing required paperwork. In these situations, approach with care. You can let the client know why the legal name is needed on the form and ask if there’s anything you can do to help make the process more comfortable. Framing the paperwork as a shared task toward their goals can help ease discomfort. Ultimately, we are aiming to convey respect to our clients, which includes giving careful attention to a client’s needs.

What do I do if I accidentally refer to a client by the wrong name or pronouns?

Mistakes happen! If you accidentally misname or misgender someone, do as you would if you accidentally called anyone by the wrong name! Simply briefly apologize, correct yourself, and respectfully continue. For example, “My client Mandy— sorry, Maxine— is seeking help,” or, “I was talking to her—sorry, I was talking to them yesterday.”

Being overly apologetic can be awkward for the person receiving the apology. A simple correction is usually the best way to proceed.

How do I know what name and pronouns to use for my client?

If you do not know what a client's preferred name and pronouns are, it's okay to ask! Here are two examples:

"Hello! My name is Mike, and my pronouns are he/him. What are your name and pronouns?"

This example utilizes sharing your name and pronouns first.

"I see on the documents that there are two different names/pronouns being used to refer to you. May I ask which name/pronouns you go by?"

This example acknowledges that there are different names/pronouns being used in documents, and it does not assume which one is the preferred one.

How do I know what terminology to use?

Language is always evolving, and it can be hard to keep up with new terminology. What was considered acceptable in the past might not be today, and what's okay now might shift in the future. So, it's not uncommon to be unsure if a word is appropriate or not!

A great resource to use is the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation's (GLAAD's) Media Reference Guide, specifically in this case the "Glossary of Terms: Transgender" section. You can view this section by visiting the following website: <https://glaad.org/reference/trans-terms>

I don't understand. Why does this matter?

You don't have to fully understand someone's experience to treat them with dignity. At VLN, we want all clients to feel safe, respected, and supported. Using someone's correct name and pronouns is a simple way to show respect to clients. Purposefully misnaming or misgendering clients goes against VLN's values and our expectations of volunteers.

Closing

You don't need to be an expert to support transgender clients. You just need to be respectful, open, and willing to get it right. Mistakes happen, but how you respond makes all the difference. By learning about names, pronouns, and respectful communication, you're helping VLN continue to be a safe and welcoming space. Thank you!