Pronouns: Important Steps in Becoming a Trans and Gender Non-Binary Ally

What is a pronoun?
- A pronoun is a word that refers to either the people talking (like I or you) or someone or something that is being talked about (like she, it, them, and this). Gender pronouns (like she and hers) specifically refer to people that you are talking about.

What is a gender pronoun?
- A gender pronoun is the pronoun that a person chooses to use for themself. For example: If Xena’s preferred pronouns are she, her, and hers, you could say, “Xena ate her food because she was hungry.”

What are some commonly used pronouns?
- She, her, hers and he, him, his are the most commonly used pronouns. Some people call these “female/feminine” and “male/masculine” pronouns, but many avoid these labels because, for example, not everyone who uses he feels like a “male” or “masculine.”
- There are also lots of gender-neutral pronouns in use. Here are a few you might hear:
  - They, them, theirs — for example, “Xena ate their food because they were hungry.” This is a pretty common gender-neutral pronoun. Note: It can in fact be used in the singular.
  - Ze, hir — for example, “Xena ate hir food because ze was hungry.” Ze is pronounced like “zee” can also be spelled zie or xe, and replaces she/he/they. Hir is pronounced like “here” and replaces her/hers/him/his/they/their.
- Some people prefer not to use pronouns at all, using their name as a pronoun instead —for example, “Xena ate Xena’s food because Xena was hungry.”
- Never, ever refer to a person as “it” or “he-she” (unless they specifically ask you to). These are offensive slurs used against trans and gender non-binary individuals.

Why is it important to respect people’s pronouns?
- You can’t always know what someone’s pronouns are by looking at them.
- Asking and correctly using someone’s pronouns is one of the most basic ways to show your respect for their gender identity.
- When someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric (or, often, all of the above).
- It is a privilege to not have to worry about which pronoun someone is going to use for you based on how they perceive your gender. If you have this privilege, yet fail to respect someone else’s gender identity, it is not only disrespectful and hurtful, but also oppressive.
- You will be setting an example; if you are consistent about using someone’s correct pronouns, others will follow your example.
- Some people may be learning about gender pronouns for the first time, so this could be a learning opportunity for them that they will keep forever.
How do I ask someone what their pronouns are?
- Try asking: “What are your pronouns?” or “Which pronouns do you like to hear?” or “Can you remind me which pronouns you like for yourself?” It can feel awkward at first, but it is not half as awkward as getting it wrong or making a hurtful assumption.
- If you are asking as part of an introduction exercise and you want to quickly explain what a pronoun is, you can try something like this: “Tell us your name, where you come from, and your pronouns. For example, I'm Xena, I'm from Chicago, and I like to be referred to with she, her, and hers pronouns.”

What if I make a mistake?
- It’s okay! Everyone slips up from time to time. The best thing to do if you use the wrong pronoun for someone is to say something right away, like, “Sorry, I meant they.” If you realize your mistake after the fact, apologize in private and move on.
- A lot of the time it can be tempting to go on and on about how bad you feel that you messed up or how hard it is for you to get it right. But please, don’t! It is inappropriate and makes the person who was mis-gendered feel awkward and responsible for comforting you, which is absolutely not their job. It is your job to remember people’s correct pronouns.

What if I notice someone’s correct pronouns are not being used?
- You may hear someone using the wrong pronoun for someone else. In most cases, it is appropriate to gently correct them without further embarrassing the individual who has been mis-gendered. This means saying something like, “Actually, Xena prefers the pronoun they,” and then moving on. If other people are consistently using the wrong pronouns for someone, do not ignore it! It is important to let trans and gender non-binary people know that you are their ally.
- It may be appropriate to approach them and say something like, “I noticed that you were getting referred to with the wrong pronoun earlier, and I know that that can be really hurtful. Would you be okay with me taking them aside and reminding them about your correct pronouns? I want to make sure that this group is a safe space for you.” Follow up if necessary, but take your cues from the comfort level of the individual who was mis-gendered. Your actions will be greatly appreciated.