

Respecting

Gender

River Lightbearer

Respecting Gender

By

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What Is Gender?

In talking about gender inclusivity, the first step is to understand what gender is and how it differs from one's sex.

At the most basic, sex is biology. It's what your body structure and chemistry show you to be, depending on factors like your chromosomes and genitals. When an obstetrician announces that a baby is a boy or a girl, they're looking at genitalia and, depending on tests that have been run, possibly genetics.

In reality, though, even sex isn't that simple. While most people fall into male or female as far as biology goes, not all do. Some people are intersex, meaning they have physical or biological characteristics associated with both the male and female sexes. Some people who are born intersex are still assigned male or female at birth based on their most prominent physical characteristics, and sometimes a baby born intersex is given surgery to remove the characteristics of one of the two sexes, though fortunately this is falling out of favor since an infant obviously can't consent and consent is important for a life-altering surgery. So while you may have heard "there are only two sexes, male and female," this isn't an entirely accurate statement.

The majority of people, however, are assigned either male or female at birth. "Assigned at birth" means that the doctor has looked at the biological characteristics and determined that the infant is a boy or a girl; they are assigning this sex to the child, because at birth there's no other way to know who the child is besides their physical appearance and biological markers.

The assigned-at-birth sex doesn't necessarily describe who the person is inside. That "who," the sense of identity, is gender. While the body determines whether the obstetrician declares a child male, female, or intersex, the mind and inner knowing are what determine whether the person is actually a man, woman, or nonbinary person.

According to the World Health Organization, “Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.” (Source: <https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender>)

Based on the society and family into which you’re born, you learn to behave according to what is expected and considered “normal” for your assigned at birth sex. For some people, this is fine; for others, trying to fit themselves into a predefined box of behaviors and patterns is painful and difficult.

Some people’s gender and assigned-at-birth sex match. For example, they may have been assigned female at birth and identify themselves as a woman. People whose sex and gender match are called cisgender; cis translates to “on the same side as.” Despite what some people have claimed, the word “cisgender” is not a slur. It’s simply the opposite of transgender.

Trans means across. Someone who is transgender has a gender that does not match their assigned-at-birth sex. A transgender person may identify as the opposite of their assigned sex; for example, someone assigned female at birth may consider their gender to be male. But transgender people also may identify as somewhere between male and female or their gender may fluctuate from time to time or even day to day. Because gender is the sense of who you are, it doesn’t necessarily remain static.

The gender binary is essentially a line with a point at either end; one point is “male” and the other is “female.” But some people identify with being somewhere between the two points. These people may consider themselves transgender and also nonbinary, or may use only one or the other term to describe themselves. Technically, someone who is nonbinary is also transgender, because their gender doesn’t match their assigned sex, but some consider “transgender” to mean only those whose gender is the opposite of their assigned sex.

I’m agender, which is part of the nonbinary range. I don’t call myself transgender, because I know people who are transgender and have transitioned either from male to female or from female to male, and I feel that using the term “transgender” for myself would somehow minimize their experiences. I was assigned female at birth, and although I don’t identify with any gender at all (I describe myself/my gender as “just me”), I present as female, meaning my clothing and general appearance are what people associate with female humans. I haven’t experienced the discrimination and hatred that a transgender man or woman is likely to have experienced, and I don’t want to appear to be claiming otherwise by using the term transgender.

The way someone presents themselves may not be what people generally associate with either their assigned sex or their gender. Gender norms, including clothing and appearance, are mainly societal and can change over time. For example, nowadays, at least in the United States, the color pink is associated with girls and blue with boys, but until the 1930s, it was the other way around. Pink was considered a “strong, masculine” color, while blue was considered “soft and feminine.”

Most people, whether cisgender, transgender, or nonbinary, learn what’s expected of people of their assigned sex through the way they’re treated and the messages they hear from parents, the media, and other people. But over time, they also develop a sense of who they are and how they want to express and present themselves. This might be in line with what they’ve been taught, particularly if they’re cisgender, but it might not be.

How someone presents themselves is a very individual choice and doesn’t always align with what society or other individuals expect. Some cisgender, heterosexual men routinely wear nail polish or makeup because they enjoy it, and I know a few cisgender men who like to wear long skirts or dresses, particularly during the summer, because they find those garments more comfortable than pants in hot weather. A transgender man might grow a beard and mustache but still wear makeup and dresses. Someone who’s nonbinary might wear clothing associated with their assigned sex or with the opposite sex, or they may wear a mix of things.

As I said above, I’m agender, which is a nonbinary identity. I was assigned female at birth and I wear “women’s” clothes. This is partly because I was late in fully understanding my gender; although I’d been saying since age three or four that I didn’t want to be a girl but knew I wasn’t a boy, having grown up in the 1970s and 1980s, I didn’t have the language to know what “not a girl but not a boy” meant or even that it was a possible thing. I was just short of my 49th birthday before I realized who I truly am, and by then I’d long been accustomed to wearing clothes associated with women.

But I also wear those clothes for a much simpler reason: I like them. They’re pretty, and I like pretty things. However, I don’t wear makeup and keep my hair short and easy to maintain, because I dislike makeup and don’t enjoy spending hours trying to style my hair; that’s been the case since my teen years, though I did experiment with makeup and more complicated hairstyles from time to time.

Just as you “can’t judge a book by its cover,” you can’t judge someone’s gender by their physical appearance. Refrain from assuming someone’s gender based on what they’re wearing, how they look, whether they wear makeup, etc., and refrain from using gendered language, such as calling them “sister” or “guy,” unless you know their gender for certain.

Why Does This Matter?

So why is any of this important to a coach, healing practitioner, or other spiritually-based practitioner?

Transgender and nonbinary people have a higher risk of being shunned by professionals and practitioners as well as family and friends. Many trans and nonbinary people have been rejected by family members and have lost friends after coming out. Some are unable to access health care, including mental health, because they can't find providers who are sensitive to their identity or their needs.

There are even cases of transgender people dying because doctors refused to give them the care they needed; for example, some transgender men have died from treatable conditions like cervical, breast, or uterine cancer because doctors insisted men don't have cervixes, breasts, or uteruses and therefore didn't even assess for those conditions despite the men showing obvious symptoms. (In the case of breast cancer, some cisgender men have also died because while all humans have breast tissue and can therefore develop cancer in that tissue, doctors associate "breast cancer" with "woman.")

People who are transgender or nonbinary are also likely to have experienced trauma. This may be related to their treatment by family and others after coming out, but even if an individual had a positive and supportive experience, simply being transgender or nonbinary in our society is traumatic because of the risk of being targeted with verbal or physical violence solely due to one's identity.

A practitioner whose client base includes transgender and nonbinary people needs to be aware of their clients' past experiences and how those may impact them. They need to understand that building trust with trans and nonbinary clients may take more time and work because of rejections and mistreatment the clients may have experienced elsewhere.

If your practice includes any type of body work, whether it's you working with your client's body such as in massage and some forms of energy healing, or you requiring your client to be "in their body," be aware that this may be difficult and painful for a transgender person. Many, though not all, trans people and some nonbinary people experience dysphoria about their body, because the outside "packaging" doesn't match who they are inside.

This can lead to issues with their body in general, for example not wanting to be touched or not wanting to look in a mirror. It can also lead to issues with specific body parts that may be associated with a gender they aren't. Breasts are considered part of a woman's anatomy, but a transgender man or a nonbinary person might have breasts and may struggle if they have to pay attention to that part of their body or if the word "breast" is used.

When doing any type of work that involves someone's body, one of the most vital things is to ask their consent before touching them in any way. This isn't only good practice for working with transgender and nonbinary people. People who are neurodivergent may not want to be touched or may need to mentally prepare themselves for physical touch. Trauma survivors also may have difficulty allowing physical touch, especially if it's unexpected. It's best practice to ask any client or student before touching them, no matter who they are or what their history includes.

With transgender and nonbinary people, follow their lead about how to refer to different parts of their body. A transgender man may prefer the word "chest" instead of "breasts." A transgender woman might prefer to avoid mentioning her penis altogether or may prefer the word "genitals." It isn't up to the practitioner to decide what the "right" word is; ask your clients how they prefer to label parts of their body, or listen to the language they use and follow their example.

The practitioner also needs to refrain from making any assumptions about someone's gender based on their body parts or physical appearance. As noted above, the body and appearance don't automatically indicate who someone is. Let your clients tell you who they are instead of guessing based on what they wear or how they look.

Avoid making judgment statements, whether positive or negative, about clients' bodies as well, unless you and they have agreed that you may make statements about their body as part of the practice. If this is necessary in your practice, make it very clear to all clients and gain their consent. Even for a cisgender person, comments like "You look like you've lost weight" can be problematic depending on their emotional relationship to their weight and appearance. You don't know, unless you've asked and they've told you, whether they've experienced trauma related to their appearance, or are recovering from an eating disorder, or something along those lines.

For a transgender person, hearing a comment, even a compliment, about a body that doesn't feel like it belongs to them can cause increased dysphoria. And unfortunately, too many people who are transgender or nonbinary hear "compliments" like "Wow, you're trans? I never would have guessed, you look just like a woman!" If you can't understand why a comment like that can be painful and even harmful, if you're cisgender I suggest considering how you would feel if someone said something to you like, "Wow, you're cisgender? I wouldn't have guessed, you look like you're trans!"

Some practices, such as yoga or mindfulness, require the person to be "in their body." This can be a difficult prospect for a number of people; for example, a survivor of physical or sexual abuse or assault might not be comfortable being in their body because their body was a source of pain. For a transgender or nonbinary person, being "in their body" might not even be an accurate phrase, because the body doesn't match who they are. It doesn't feel like their body, it feels like a foreign place they have no choice but to live.

Having to follow the directive to be in their body can lead to dysphoria, distress, and even traumatization. While it is necessary for some practices to include a mental and/or emotional connection to the body, it's best when possible to find a way to modify this so someone with body dysmorphia or dysphoria, or someone whose body is a source of trauma, can engage in the practice without feeling distressed or traumatized.

I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s, when the word "transgender" was barely, if ever, used (I certainly don't recall hearing it during that time), and there was little understanding of gender and how it differed from sex. For that matter, there was a lot of misunderstanding about sexual orientation. While the world has made progress, there is still a lack of understanding and knowledge in these areas.

That isn't inherently a bad thing, but it can cause people to feel uncomfortable or uncertain when working with transgender or nonbinary people. This discomfort might come across to your clients, and because of past experiences, they may read it as personal discomfort with them, which can lead to them feeling uncomfortable or even unsafe in accessing your services.

It's okay to feel uncomfortable or to question whether you're qualified to work with someone who's trans or nonbinary, but when interacting with them directly, it's important not to let that discomfort show. It's also vital that you work to learn more about gender and how to speak to and about and work with trans and nonbinary people; reading this resource is a good start! I offer other resources at the end of the book that can help as well.

A lot of services and practices are stated to be gendered. For example, I know a number of coaches who market their services by saying, "I work with women

who...” While it may be accurate to say that you serve women, if that’s all you say, you may be missing out on people who are your ideal client but aren’t women.

If you know for a fact that your client base includes someone, or multiple people, who are nonbinary, but you continue to address your clients collectively as “women,” “ladies,” “sisters,” etc., you are misgendering your client. Some nonbinary people just nod, smile, and accept the reality that the coach who is supposed to be supporting them refuses to recognize their actual gender; some of us choose not to work with people who persist in addressing their clients with gendered terms.

For me personally, even before I realized I was nonbinary, I felt extremely uncomfortable being addressed with any term associated with female humans. Being called a woman, even as part of a group in which the other people were, in fact, women, was painful to me and caused a lot of cognitive dissonance.

After I came out, I spoke with a coach with whom I was working at the time and said I’d noticed she referred to us as “women” or other gendered terms, and asked whether she would consider shifting to more neutral language, as I’d seen her do in her newsletter.

Although she seemed open to making that change, I noticed what appeared to me to be an *increase* in her use of female-gender terms after that discussion, with the result that I stopped engaging in her coaching group, chose not to sign on again with her when my term was up, and will not recommend her to anyone I know to be nonbinary. She is certainly allowed to run her business—and use terminology—as she sees fit, but as a nonbinary person, and especially when I had only just come out and it was taking a lot of courage for me to speak up for myself, I did not feel safe or welcome in her group any longer after seeing that she chose to continue and increase her use of gendered terms.

If you only say you welcome nonbinary people if someone approaches you privately and asks, you aren’t serving nonbinary people. Some won’t ask, because they haven’t come out yet. Some may have faced rejection and even bullying or verbal abuse from those to whom they have come out, and they’re reluctant to ask a coach they don’t know if they would be welcome. If you welcome people who are not cisgender, say it in your copy. Show that you truly are a coach or practitioner who welcomes a diverse group of people—and make it clear without waiting to be asked.

Even if you don’t know for certain that you have someone nonbinary in your client base, it doesn’t hurt to transition to using gender neutral terms. “People” instead of “women.” “Siblings” or “sibs” instead of “sisters.” Whether you’re creating marketing copy or addressing your clients, using gender neutral terms indicates that you recognize not everyone considers themselves a woman and that you are open and accepting of this fact.

If you're concerned that using gender-neutral terms might result in men coming to you, and you aren't willing to accept male clients, you can explain this to them when you speak with them. There are also other ways of phrasing things to be inclusive of nonbinary people without including people who just plain aren't part of your target audience. I know of one "historically women's college" that welcomes "women and people who identify with the experience of being female," which includes nonbinary people who were assigned female at birth as well as transgender men and transgender women.

A note, though: A transgender woman IS a woman. If you state you work with women but you don't include trans women, you are being dishonest. If you only want to work with cisgender women, that's certainly a choice you can make, albeit one that might lead to accusations of prejudice and transphobia; but if that is the choice you want to make, be clear about it. If you only work with cisgender women, put it right out there in your marketing copy. Don't say you work with women if transgender women aren't included in that term in your mind.

Many transgender and nonbinary people have encountered service providers and practitioners who don't understand them. In general, a lot of us are still learning about what transgender and nonbinary mean—even those of us who are ourselves transgender or nonbinary—and the different genders and ways of identifying that exist. There's nothing wrong with not knowing, but refrain from expecting a trans or nonbinary client or student to educate you. It isn't their job to teach you everything about transgender and nonbinary identities. They may offer to explain things to you, and it's okay to ask them questions specific to them and who they are, but if you want a broader understanding, Google and other tools are your friends.

When someone tells you who they are, listen to them. Respect what they say. If they ask you to call them by a certain name or use specific pronouns when speaking to or about them, do it—even when they aren't listening. Normalize asking for chosen names and pronouns along with legal names on your paperwork or when introduced to someone, and even if you're cisgender, get used to giving your own pronouns, because this helps normalize it and helps trans and nonbinary people feel less self-conscious when they state their pronouns.

Be prepared to work to establish trust, and do the work. Demonstrate that you can be trusted to respect each and every one of your clients or students and that you provide a safe space for them to be who they are. Above all, remember that you don't have to "understand" transgender and nonbinary identities to accept them and respect transgender and nonbinary people.

What can you do?

- State your pronouns along with your name when introducing yourself
- On intake forms, rather than having multiple choice for gender, leave a blank where people can write in their gender
- If you have control over your physical space, establish nongendered restrooms, changing rooms, etc.
- If you hear a colleague or another client or student using transphobic—or any prejudiced—language or misgendering a trans or nonbinary client, speak up, and offer support to the person who was on the receiving end if applicable.
- Use nongendered language in your marketing materials, website, etc., e.g. “people” instead of “women” and “they” instead of “she.”
- Believe, respect, and validate your clients’ statements of who they are
- Ask transgender and nonbinary clients how you can best support them instead of assuming you know what they need
- Connect with organizations that support LGBTQ+ people, both for tips on being more inclusive and to demonstrate that you are an ally
- Listen to and validate your clients when they tell you who they are

Glossary and Phrasing Suggestions

Please note that this is far from an exhaustive or complete list of vocabulary. There are online glossaries that are more accurate and cover a wider range of genders and associated concepts. The suggested phrasings following the definitions are just that, suggestions.

Sex: a category assigned based primarily on reproductive function and structures. Someone born with a penis is generally assigned to the male sex; someone born with a vulva is generally assigned to the female sex. “Sex assigned at birth” refers to whether someone is designated male or female when they are born.

Gender: a person’s sense of who they are, and a collection of societally assigned norms and behaviors

Cisgender: an adjective applied to someone whose assigned-at-birth sex matches their gender

Transgender: an adjective applied to someone whose assigned-at-birth sex does not match their gender

Nonbinary: an adjective applied to someone whose gender is not consistently either male or female (though it may be one or both at times)

Gender fluid: the gender is not constant; it may change over time, or even from one day to the next

Agender: there is no sense of gender at all

Genderqueer: a term sometimes used by people who are not cisgender to describe their sense of gender

As stated above, “cisgender” and “transgender,” and the other gender terms, are adjectives, not nouns. Saying, for example, “The transgender” is incorrect; it would be like saying “the purple.” A more correct phrasing would be, “The transgender man,” “the transgender woman,” or “the transgender person.”

Going along with the above, the short form “trans” is sometimes used in place of “transgender.” This is also an adjective, and is not meant to be attached to a noun. So in written form, “the trans man” would be correct; “the transman” would not, and could be considered offensive because it implies that a transgender man is somehow not an actual man.

If you welcome nonbinary people in your practice or classes, you will want to avoid using gendered language. There are a number of ways to do this:

- Instead of saying, “I support women who...” (whatever your practice is), say, “I support people who...”
- If you want to be clear in your copy and verbal statements that you don’t work at all with a specific gender, you could say, “I support women and nonbinary people who can relate to being female.” Or “I support people who are not male.” It can get a bit wordy, but unless you genuinely only want to work with women or only with men, or want to work with nonbinary people as well but don’t care if they feel welcome, you may have to accept being wordy.

In a recent networking group meeting when the leader forgot that I was nonbinary and referred to us all as “women,” my guide gave me the term “female-aligned person” as a suggestion to pass along to the group leader. To me that term is problematic, but I’m having trouble putting my finger on why; if you’re looking for a slightly shorter phrase than what I’ve said above, try this one and see if it fits for you.

I regularly see coaches and practitioners use words like “women” and “sisters” to address their audience or a group with whom they’re working. This is exclusionary of and can be very uncomfortable for nonbinary people. There are plenty of words in the English language that can refer to a group of people without indicating gender:

- Instead of “women,” you could use “people,” “folks,” or a non-gendered term of your choosing such as “magic-makers” or “divine beings.”
- Instead of “sisters,” you could use “siblings,” “family,” “companions,” or any other non-gendered term that implies the type of relationship you’re going for.

As part of your ideal client/target audience, which should be something you’ve considered if you’re running a business, I strongly recommend including the genders of the people in that group, and if you determine that nonbinary and

transgender people are among them, consider the phrasing you'll use to ensure that everyone in your target audience feels welcome, supported, and respected. Because after all, if you're in business to serve others and help them progress and heal, don't you owe it to them and yourself to support and respect them?

I hope this resource has answered some of your questions and given you some guidance in creating a gender-inclusive practice. If you have additional questions, please feel free to reach out to me at river@riverevolutions.com. I also offer consultation to practitioners in being gender-inclusive and crafting gender-inclusive website and marketing copy; reach out to set up an inquiry call if I can help you with this!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



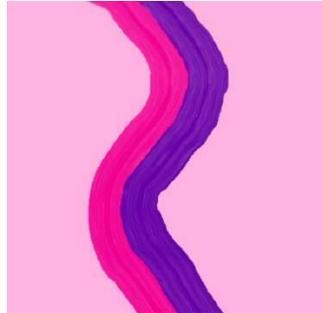
River Lightbearer (she/her/they/them), also known as Kim Ramsey-Winkler, has been on her own healing journey most of her adult life and has a passion for helping others heal and find their inner light. As a survivor of abuse and trauma, her heart is in guiding other survivors to gain ground in their journeys and create the lives they want to live.

Through her practice, RiverEvolutions, River offers Chios, channeling, card readings, and mindset coaching in person to clients in the greater Boston area of Massachusetts, as well as online/by distance to clients around the world.

River is a nonbinary eclectic Witch, and has previously authored a number of young adult novels under the name Jo Ramsey and adult romance novels under the names Karenn Colcroft and KC Winter. She is the mother to a daughter, a transgender offspring, and a son-in-law, as well as the grandmother to two little boys and five souls whose physical forms sadly didn't see life outside the womb.

Living in Massachusetts, River splits time between the home she shares with her husband and the home owned by her committed life partner. When not writing or serving other humans, River is the servant to two cats.

RIVEREVOLUTIONS



RiverEvolutions is the name given to me to use in my practice as catalyst, channel, and healing practitioner, a reflection of my spiritual name, River Lightbearer. Through my work, I help survivors of trauma, as well as others, gain clarity and direction to progress on their healing journeys and throughout their lives.

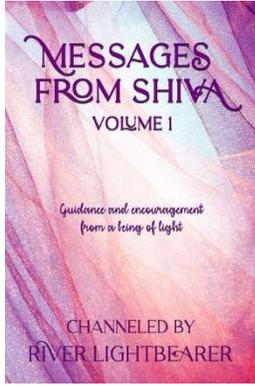
Channeling is the cornerstone of RiverEvolutions. In a channeling session, you're able to speak, directly or relayed through me, with one of my guides: Shiva, a being of light, or Pietkela, a higher-level being. They share their profound wisdom and compassion to offer guidance and help you identify aspects of your life in which change would benefit you as well as aspects that benefit you now. Pietkela and I also offer guided support to those seeking conscious connection with their own guides.

Chios® Energy Healing, a method of working with your energy to bring positive changes to your mind and body, restores balance and flow to your energy system, bringing you clarity, calmness, and a heightened sense of well-being. I am a Certified Chios® Master Teacher and Chios® Master of Healing Consciousness.

For those who operate their own spiritually-based practices, I offer channeling sessions focused on your business and how best to proceed. As a nonbinary human and a trauma survivor who has done extensive research and studying of the effects of trauma on mind and body, I also offer consultation to practitioners who want to develop a more gender-inclusive and/or trauma-informed practice. And for those seeking an additional service to add to your practice, I provide instruction in the Chios® Energy Healing modality.

Learn more about me and my services by visiting <http://www.riverevolutions.com> or emailing info@riverevolutions.com.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS BY RIVER LIGHTBEARER



Messages from Shiva

For most of her life, River Lightbearer has worked closely with her guides, beings who are connected to and work with her to help on her spiritual path. One of those guides, a being of light called Shiva, has collaborated with River to share daily messages of encouragement and compassion on social media. This book is a compilation of the first several months of those messages, reorganized based on the topics and themes that will most benefit those navigating their lives, healing journeys, and spiritual paths. Whether you read the book from beginning to end or open it at random to find the message you most need on any given day, River and Shiva intend that you find the guidance you seek within these pages.

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