



## Labels Are for You to Determine

It's pretty hard to go through a day without using labels. We label our feelings, the reactions of others, the pets we take care of, and the classes we take. We even label the people around us because of what we think their sexual orientation and gender identity are. Usually, people in our society expect others to be straight and cisgender (someone who identifies as the gender they were assigned at birth) – but as we know, there are many more label out there. In fact, some people prefer not to use labels at all!

**So how do we find the label that fits us best?** A great way to start is by exploring the common terms listed in the “Definitions” section of COMING OUT AS YOU. You may find one you like right away, or decide to take some more time to figure out which word really matches how you feel. It is important to keep in mind that different people in the LGBT community choose different labels for themselves for many different reasons.

In addition to the common phrases, there are also many more that are used in the LGBT community to describe certain parts of an identity. Phrases like “Same Gender Loving” or the “Down Low”/ “DL” often replace “lesbian,” “gay,” or “bi” in cultural communities with strong homophobic beliefs. Terms such as “Butch” and “Femme” can be used to describe lesbians who express their gender in a more masculine or feminine way.

“Queer” is used as an umbrella term to describe someone’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Some people use the label queer when they do not strictly identify as straight or cisgender. It is sometimes used as a bigger term to refer to all LGBTIQ people. It can also be a political identity, which challenges binary thinking and embraces both sexual orientation and gender identity as potentially fluid. Even though “queer” has been used in the past to put down members of the LGBT community, it has been reclaimed as a positive word by many LGBT people. Unfortunately, some people still use this word in a hurtful way.

**But how can someone find out what label, if any, you use?** They can simply ask you, or you can choose to tell them. The most supportive action you can take to validate and affirm a person’s identity is to accept it. Embrace diversity and empower one another to feel good about being a unique individual. You might want to try practicing asking the question: “What gender pronouns do you go by?” Or, “How do you like to be referred to (i.e. gender pronoun or name, etc.)?” It also might help to practice having a supportive response to a person’s answer. You just might be the first or only person who understands and accepts them for who they truly are.

Remember, you always have the chance to choose the label that is best for you; even if that means you choose no label at all. No one – not even a parent, your best friend, or a stranger – can tell you who you are based on how you look, talk, walk, behave, who you spend time with, date or love.