NAVIGATING PRONOUNS*

What are the different kinds of gender pronouns?

Gendered Pronouns	She/Her/Hers/Herself
	He/Him/His/Himself
Gender Neutral Pronouns	They/Them/Their/Theirs/Themself
	Ze/Hir/Hirs/Hirself (pronounced "zee" and "here")
	Plus many others!!

Why do pronouns matter?
- Pronouns are a big part of many languages, and a common way that many of us refer to one another in conversation. **Using someone's pronouns correctly is an important part of showing basic respect, just like using someone's correct name.** For example, it would be disrespectful to call your friend Tom by "Thomas" or to refer to your client Brittany as "Brad."
- It's normal to feel challenged by adjusting when someone changes pronouns, learning pronouns that are new to you, or using pronouns that are different than the way you perceive someone. While it may require you to stretch outside of your comfort zone, using respectful pronouns is a critical way that you can begin to reexamine assumptions about gender that particularly harm trans communities.

How do you find out what pronouns someone uses?
- ~~Just guess based on what they look like!~~ This commonly practiced method can lead to making mistakes. We can't tell what pronoun someone uses based on how they look/how we are reading their gender expression.
- Ask them!
    - If you are eventually going to use a person's pronouns in conversation, you should find out which pronouns the person uses!
    - If you're going to ask some people, ask all people! Don't isolate only people you read as gender nonconforming.
    - The question can sound like, "I use he/him pronouns, what pronouns do you use?" (Share your own even if you never get referred to with the wrong pronouns!)
    - If someone is confused by the question, they may not know what a pronoun is! Sharing your own can help give them an example, or you could phrase your question more specifically (e.g. "How do you like to be referred to by others? Some people use she or he or they...")
    - If someone gets upset or defensive, they likely do not understand why you are asking. You might take a moment in advance to explain why you're asking: "I'm working on not making assumptions about which pronoun people use based on how I see them", or "This is something we do at our organization/agency to make sure we're being respectful of everyone."

When do you ask about pronouns?
- When you're meeting someone new! Pairing the pronoun question up with the name question can help to know when you might ask.
- If you are a provider, you can add a question about pronouns on your intake form along with other identifying information. If not on your intake form, you can ask during an intake interview. See above for example language.
- You can add pronouns to the list of what folks should share in a meeting when you would usually go around and share names and departments.

Isn't asking for pronouns outing* someone? (*To "out" someone is to disclose their identity without their consent)
- Actually, pronouns are not private. Pronouns are social! You and others will use pronouns for someone regardless of whether space is created for them to share the ones they actually use. If you ask everyone, you won't be targeting anyone in particular or isolating them.

- It is true that some people use different pronouns in different spaces and not respecting this could out them. Find out if a client, colleague, or friend only uses their pronouns in some spaces and uses different pronouns in others. (e.g. a student who uses one pronoun at school and another at home for safety reasons.)

What if I haven't had the opportunity to find out what pronouns someone uses? This might also come up because you have incredibly limited interactions with clients/students/colleagues, which do not often warrant a pronoun conversation.

- Use gender neutral language! Here are some examples:
  - "A client/student/customer up front is wondering where to go to turn the paperwork in..."
  - "I don't know what pronouns that person uses" or "I liked what that person said about.."
  - "There's someone here I don't recognize; have you met them? Over there with the glasses..."

What do I do if I accidentally use the wrong pronouns for someone? How should I react?
- Acknowledge your mistake. This can sound like simply changing to the correct pronoun mid-sentence. (e.g. "I was telling her....um, him to come by in the afternoon.")
- Move on quickly. Do not sit in the moment stewing over the mistake (e.g. "Oh shoot! I've been so good at getting it right lately! It's tough, I mean I knew him before he was a him!"). Get back to whatever you were talking about as soon as you've changed to the right pronoun.
- Center the needs of the person who was mispronouned, not your own. Your needs are probably to be assured you are still a good person/ally or affirmed in the work you've been doing to respect that person's identity ("I've been trying! I've been getting better!"). Do not look to be taken care of by the mispronouned person (e.g. "Cut me some slack" or otherwise putting them in the position to say, "it's ok"); take care of them in that moment by correcting yourself and moving on. If you need to process what happened, do it later, on your own time, with someone other than that person.

How do you use gender neutral pronouns in a sentence?

They	"They are bringing their friend with them because they don't like being by themself."
	-"Whose is this?" -"It's theirs"
Ze/Hir	"Ze is bringing hir friend with hir because ze doesn't like being by hirself."
	-"Whose is this?" -"It's hirs"

Who uses gender neutral pronouns?
- ~~Only young people.~~ People of any age use gender neutral pronouns! Age and pronouns do not correlate in any particular way.
- ~~Only people of certain genders.~~ Gender neutral pronouns are used by people who hold a variety of different gender identities.

Other best practices to remember:
- **Say "gender pronoun" rather than "preferred pronoun."** Pronouns are often not simply a preference (such as "I prefer chocolate ice cream to vanilla, but I'll take whatever") but a key part of respecting one another.
- **Talk about specific pronouns such as she, he, they, etc. rather than saying "female pronouns" or "male pronouns."** Though gendered pronouns are culturally associated with gender identities (e.g. men use "he" and women use "she"), this does not apply to everyone. For example, some people who use "she" do not identify as women but may use "she/her" pronouns for safety reasons or in different situations.
- **If you've never had your pronouns questioned, be mindful of how you share your pronouns.** For example, if you say "I don't care" or "you can use any pronoun for me," make sure that you understand the impact of being called pronouns that do not fit your identity.

* The Navigating Pronouns resource was developed by Nash Jones, tash shatz, & Neola Young. Updated 2016.