

Common Missteps of Trans Allies

	What it sounds like	How it's often experienced	Alternative approaches
The Uncomfortable Apologist	<p>"I'm so, so, so sorry to disrespect you in that way. This really isn't who I am, I really do care and normally I'm better than this."</p> <p>"I'm so sorry I keep messing up, this is just a really big change for me, and it's going to take some time for me to wrap my head around it."</p>	<p>...as being outed</p> <p>...as being forced to comfort someone who has disrespected them</p> <p>...as being told that their identity is a burden</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apologize once and move on. Then practice, so you can improve. • If you feel you've made a major misstep, ask the person what they'd like you to do. Then do it.
The Uninvited Ally	<p>"What do you think about ENDA? I just think that whole thing was really wrong."</p> <p>"Have you seen TransAmerica? I think it's AWESOME. It might be my favorite movie of all time."</p>	<p>...as being outed</p> <p>...as being cornered by someone who is trying too hard (which is awkward for anyone!)</p> <p>...as erasing other parts of their whole person by focusing only on their trans identity</p> <p>...as being asked to give "ally points"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take cues from the person you're talking to: only bring up someone's identity if & when they do. • Respond to the substance of what someone contributes, not just their identity. • Build a network of allies to expand your awareness, so that you don't rely on trans people to validate you as an ally. (It's not their job!) • Know that there are many steps in ally development including and beyond awareness of trans-specific media, books, and issues.
The Nervous Overdoer	<p>"Thank you so much for sharing your experience and diversity with us."</p> <p>"That dress is beautiful and your hair is so great!"</p>	<p>...as being outed</p> <p>...as being cornered by someone who is trying too hard (which is awkward for anyone!)</p> <p>...as being put on display</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compliment transgender people on things that you would compliment anyone else on. • Respond to the substance of what someone contributes, not just their identity.
The Type A	<p>"I've been to a million Trans 101s, I've pretty much got it down."</p> <p>"I know the basics really well, so I can facilitate a training—we don't need a transgender person to do it."</p>	<p>...as being silenced or prevented from speaking from their own experience</p> <p>...as effectively letting them know that you are unwilling to grow as an ally, and that you believe you can learn everything there is to know about the experience of trans people in books and workshops.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer your leadership when asked to do so by trans people. • Know that allies never finish learning! Approach being an ally with humility. • If you plan to facilitate a conversation or training on trans issues, lift up the voices of trans people speaking from their own experience. Ask a trans person to (co-)design and (co-)facilitate.
The Gender-Blind	<p>"I don't really categorize people by gender."</p> <p>"I don't care what pronouns you use for me."</p> <p>"Gender is an arbitrary way to divide things, so I choose to ignore it."</p>	<p>...as invalidating that person's identity and minimizing their experience of oppression</p> <p>...as appropriating that person's experience while failing to acknowledge your own privilege</p> <p>...as proving that you know more about that person's identity than they do</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow trans people to define their own identities. Then support their individual definitions. • Share your preferred pronouns when asked. Know that many trans people risk a lot to get those around them to use their preferred pronouns, and that it shouldn't be taken lightly. • Know that gender is a social construct, but like many constructs, it has deep & concrete impacts in people's lives.
The Questioner/ Appropriator	<p>"I'm pretty sure I'm two spirit."</p> <p>"I don't really conform to gender norms, so a lot of trans stuff really impacts me."</p>	<p>...as being asked to work out someone else's identity, which can be exhausting, especially when they haven't agreed to play that role.</p> <p>...as appropriating that person's experience as a way to downplay your own privilege</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you are looking for support with your own identity, ask if the person is willing to talk about it and be prepared to accept that they may not be. And know that there are plenty of formal networks for support for people who are questioning. • Recognize that while common elements of gender oppression impact trans and gender non-conforming people, trans people face unique social and political struggles.
The Shut Down	<p><i>This person fears making mistakes so much that they steer conversations with transgender people away from trans identities and communities, even when transgender people bring those topics up. They deeply want to remain respectful—and avoid asking something offensive or saying something inappropriate. Unfortunately, this may mean having halting conversations or allowing interactions to dead-end. Some may even avoid interactions with transgender people altogether.</i></p>	<p>...as being shown that their identity is too complex or burdensome to understand.</p> <p>...as being unwanted or disrespected by you. Some may even experience your disengagement as transphobia if they don't understand why you don't interact with them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to transgender people, and let them discuss their own identities & communities! You won't overcome your fear—or grow as an ally—if you don't. You also won't fully understand the needs and priorities of the LGBT community if you don't interact with the "T." • Missteps normally occur when non-transgender people try to bring up things like someone's surgical status, their transition, and other identity-specific experiences. So take cues from the person you're talking to: only bring up someone's identity if they do. • For more help, see our handout, "Tips for Talking with Trans & Gender Non-Conforming People."