

10 Things You're Actually Saying When You Ignore Someone's Gender Pronouns

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1. I know you better than you know yourself.

When you make the decision to not respect someone's pronouns, what you are ultimately saying is that their personal truth is something you are more knowledgeable about than them. You're saying, "How could you possibly know your gender? Only I could know that, and you're wrong." The reality is, someone's gender identity — how they relate to their bodies and to the notions of femininity and masculinity — is *only for that person* to discover and declare. You are not living their life, and therefore, could not possibly know their gender better than they could. When you use the incorrect pronouns, though, you are saying that you are intimately more familiar with who they are than they are. And logically speaking, that doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Since when are you the expert on other peoples' lives? If she says she's a woman, I would think she would know better than you do, just like she knows her favorite food is spaghetti, she's a Buddhist, and her favorite color is teal.

2. I would rather hurt you repeatedly than change the way I speak about you.

Each time we mis-gender someone, we are inflicting harm. Would you rather hurt someone or simply change the way you are speaking?

3. Your sense of safety is not important to me.

When we mis-gender someone, we run the risk of threatening their personal sense of safety, as well as their physical safety. When someone feels invalidated or disrespected, they may not feel safe or comfortable in the space. We might also risk outing them as transgender to other people around us — folks who may not know they are trans, who may become aggressive or even violent if they realize this person is transgender. This could cause harm that we did not intend. A transgender person could lose their housing, their job, or even their friends if their status as transgender is revealed. If someone has asked you to use specific pronouns, it could be a matter of safety — whether it's their sense of safety or their physical autonomy and security. The bottom-line: If they ask you to use specific pronouns, use them unless they ask otherwise. Their safety could and often does depend on it.

4. Your identity isn't real and shouldn't be acknowledged.

When you ignore someone's pronouns and opt for your own, what you are saying is that you do not recognize their identity as authentic, and you are refusing to acknowledge it as such. In other words, you heard their truth, but you are not accepting it. Instead, you are ignoring it. You are saying, "You said this is so, but I don't believe you, so I will reject your truth and replace it with my assumptions." "You said you have a dog, but I like cats, so I'm going to pretend you have a cat. Here, have a bag of cat food." "You said you have cancer, but that's too much for me to deal with, so I'm going to pretend you're healthy. Let's flush your medications down the toilet in celebration!" "You said you are filing for divorce, but that makes me sad, so I'm going to keep pretending we're married. Where do you want to get dinner tonight, honey?" "You said you live on the third floor, but I hate climbing stairs, so I'm going to throw your housewarming party in the apartment downstairs, which I'll pretend is yours." "You said you're a man, but that would force me to use different pronouns, so I'm going to pretend you're a woman." What you're ultimately doing is living in a make-believe land. Someone has told you the truth, their lived experience and their reality, but you have replaced what you heard with your version of what you wish were true. We should treat each other as the experts on our own experience, and respect the identities we claim. To do otherwise is to live in denial. The truth will not change no matter how adamant your refusal to see it may be.

5. I want to teach everyone around me to disrespect you.

When you continue to use the incorrect pronouns, you are teaching everyone around you to use those same (incorrect) pronouns. Your transgender friend now has to correct not only you, but all of the people you've taught to use those same pronouns. You are working against them and forcing them to come out as transgender over and over again. You are making their already very difficult job much, much harder.

6. Offending you is fine if it makes *me* feel more comfortable.

What you are really saying is that your sense of comfort is more important than offending someone else. You are saying that you are okay with hurting someone repeatedly, as long as you get to remain comfortable and unchallenged. That it's okay to be disrespectful, as long as it keeps things easy for you.

7. I can hear you talking, but I'm not really listening.

Yes, I heard you speak your truth, your lived experience, your journey — but I wasn't really listening. I'm going to ignore what you've said and continue mis-gendering you. I will hear what you're saying, but I won't truly listen to you because your experience isn't important to me.

8. Being who you truly are is an inconvenience to me.

Rather than being proud of you for living your truth, or commending your courage for revealing that truth to me, I'm going to ignore what you've said because your identity is an inconvenience. I should never have to change how I refer to you. I shouldn't have to change anything. I should be able to be comfortable at all times. Valuing your identity is a burden on me. Even though transgender people face disproportionate rates of violence, suicide, homelessness, and discrimination, the *real* inconvenience here is me having to change which pronouns I use to refer to you. Because your struggle isn't difficult enough as it is. It's *my* struggle, the struggle to switch pronouns, that is the real tragedy here.

9. I would prefer it if you stopped being honest with me.

When someone reveals their truth and you ignore and invalidate it, what you're really saying is that you'd prefer that they weren't honest with you. You'd prefer that they lied to you, so that you would never be burdened or inconvenienced by their identity or their struggles. What you're saying is that you'd prefer if they were always dishonest, just to make your life easier. You would rather them live a lie and make things easier for you, instead of embracing their truth and happiness, and moving forward as their authentic, best self. You like dishonesty, it seems, because dishonesty allows you to maintain the illusion of what you would rather this person be.

10. I am not an ally, a friend, or someone you can trust.

Because I have criticized, rejected, and invalidated your identity, *and* refuse to acknowledge it as real, I've proven I am not someone you can talk to, not someone you can feel comfortable around, not someone who will listen and advocate for you. When I choose to mis-gender you, I have decided my own interests are far more important than your safety, validation, and dignity. And when I made that decision, I probably gave you the impression that I am not someone you can trust.