Tips on how to be a trans ally

Educate yourself...

...on issues of importance to trans people by reading books, articles and guides, and by listening to the stories of people who identify as trans. Here are some suggestions:

**Books:** *Transgender History: the Roots of Today’s Revolution* by Susan Stryker. This book provides a good overview of the history of trans people across the globe.

*To My Trans Sisters* by Charlie Craggs. A successful collection of letters written by trans women (politicians, scientists, models, athletes, authors, actors and activists) who share the lessons they have learnt.

*Whipping Girl* by Julia Serano, who shares her experiences and observations relating to femininity, societal attitudes towards trans women, gender and sexuality.

**Television:** *Boy Meets Girl* is a comedy-drama starring Michelle Hendley as a transgender woman living in a small town in Virginia.

What is a trans ally?

“A trans ally is someone who commits to being open-minded and respectful to people who may have different or unconventional gender identities or presentations; who takes the time to learn more about trans people and trans lives; who confronts assumptions around gender roles and gender presentation; and who works to change the misunderstandings and mistreatment of trans people.”

(from trans@mit, resources for trans* and gender questioning people + allies of MIT)

Trans allies are not ‘experts’ in issues relating to the trans community. They are individuals wanting to become more confident in talking about trans issues, and more effective in dispelling myths and misunderstanding about the trans community. Trans allies at work want to be equipped and ready to defend trans people in challenging and unreceptive situations.

The fear of ‘messing up’ and unintentionally offending someone should not inhibit individuals from becoming trans allies and engaging with trans issues.
*Sense8* is a science fiction drama television series on Netflix. It is based on eight strangers from different parts of the world who suddenly become ‘sansates’ i.e. human beings who are mentally and emotionally linked. One aim of the show is to explore themes that are not habitually showcased in many science fiction shows.

*The Death and Life of Marsha P Johnson* is a documentary focusing on the mysterious death of Marsha P Johnson who fought for the rights of gay, lesbian, and gender nonconforming people.

*Butterfly* is a drama about the complex relationship between separated parents and their division in opinion over how to support their youngest child, Max, who from a young age has identified as a girl but who has supressed these feelings.

**Recognise that...**

- People have the right to define their gender, regardless of the sex they were assigned at birth
- The terminology a trans person uses to describe their identity must be recognised
- The trans community is diverse. Trans identities intersect with other aspects of self, including for example race, sexual orientation and age
- Trans people and their concerns should be taken seriously, even if the significance of these is not fully understood by everyone
- It is a criminal offense to reveal a person’s trans history without their prior consent.

**Don’t assume that...**

...because you cannot visually identify anyone in a room as trans, there are no trans people present.

...all trans people feel “trapped in the wrong body.” This is an oversimplification and not the way all trans people feel.

...all trans people identify as “men” or “women.” Many identify as both, neither, or something altogether outside of the gender binary of female-male.

...a trans person needs to disclose that they are trans in order to feel happy and whole. What is important is living their life as their authentic self.

...all individuals who have transitioned identify as trans: some do, whilst others may just want to be seen as their gender-affirmed selves (e.g. ‘a man’ rather than ‘a trans man’).
Respect people’s privacy and don’t ask ...

• Someone if they are trans if you suspect they might be
• About a person’s hormone or surgical status
• To see pre-transition photos or ask what a person’s name “used to be.” Accepting ‘who someone is’ is what is important
• About their sex life. It is no more appropriate to ask this of a trans person than it would be to ask anyone else.

Do not continually bombard trans people with questions or expect them to be ‘trans encyclopaedias’ for all members of the trans community. If a trans person has confided in you that they are trans, one way of framing a question could be “Would it be ok if I asked you about x sometime?” This gives the trans person the right to determine when (and whether) the conversation will take place.

(taken from the guide to being a trans ally)

Avoid compliments or “helpful” tips such as ...

• “I would never have known you were trans.”
• “You look just like a real man.”
• “She’s so gorgeous, I would never have guessed she was a trans person.”
• “You’re so brave.”
• “You’d pass so much better if you wore less/more make-up, had a better wig, etc.”
• “Have you considered a voice coach?”

(some of these examples are taken/adapted taken from Tips for Allies of transgender people, GLAAD)

Use the right pronouns and titles ...

• Ensuring that your pronoun use matches a trans person’s self-identified gender, regardless of whether they have undergone any medical procedures.
• Trying to follow the lead of the trans person. If you get it wrong, apologise and move on, trying not to make the same mistake again.
Whilst it is understandable that you may get pronouns mixed up to begin with, do bear in mind that this can have a damaging effect on a trans person’s wellbeing and it is important that you aim to correct yourself as quickly as possible.

Some Chairs of meetings have adopted the practice of introducing pronouns at the start of a meeting (e.g. “My name is Mary Smith and I use the pronouns ‘she, ‘her’) to ensure that colleagues are familiar with correct pronoun usage.

**Challenge transphobia and discourage people from ...**

- Speculating about someone’s gender
- Consistently referring to someone’s trans history
- Questioning someone’s ability to ‘pass’ as someone who isn’t trans
- Suggesting that trans people should use disability-accessible toilets
- Referring to trans people as ‘it’ or ‘he-she’ or ‘she-he’
- Putting a person’s chosen name or chosen pronoun in quotation marks
- Questioning a trans person’s assessment of their identity or experience, or their assessment of whether an incident was transphobic. Trans individuals are much more practiced in recognising transphobia and its impact on their life.

It is important not to let transphobic comments and jokes slide and become acceptable everyday practices. Instead of confronting someone, it might be a better idea to commit to a private and meaningful conversation. An example on how to initiate this is “As someone who is an ally to people who are trans, I feel it is my obligation to talk to people when they say something that feels wrong. And I feel like the joke you made is insulting to people who are trans.”

(from the guide to being a trans ally, published by straightforequality.org)
Share your knowledge by....
Talking about trans topics and trans rights and engage people in discussions. A lot of information people have about trans identities is based on stereotypes, misinformation and assumptions. Let people know you are a resource if they ever want to talk.

Further reading and resources

Complete Royal Holloway’s Introduction to Trans Awareness e-module.

Read the article *The gender-fluid generation: young people on being male, female or non-binary* for observations relating to gender identity and experiences and how different individuals may label themselves.

Stonewall has published *First steps to trans inclusion guide* It includes information on terminology, workplace experiences, examples of transphobia/transphobic language in the workplace and an overview of protections trans staff are guaranteed under law in the workplace.

TranzWiki is a comprehensive directory of groups campaigning for, supporting or assisting, trans and gender non-conforming individuals.

Living my life is a booklet produced by the centre for HIV and Sexual Health in partnership with TransBareAll as part of the Pacesetters programme to reduce health inequalities.

The LGBT Resource Centre has a list of ‘do’s and don’ts’ for Trans allies.

trans@MIT have produced a recommended reading list.

trans@MIT have developed *Action Tips for Allies of Trans People.*

LGBT Resource Centre *Trans Ally: Do’s and Don’ts.*

equality@rhul.ac.uk for feedback or further information.