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How You Talk to Someone Matters

By Frances Bates

Hello, my name is Frances, and my pronouns are she, her, hers. What are yours?

You now know how I would like to be referred to but what happens when you don't know? Stereotypically, people will just choose for the person. The problem with guessing is that it can be rude or even hurtful. The best way to prevent unintentional mistreatment of someone is to stay informed. This article will teach you a few ways to respectfully communicate with someone new while giving your vocabulary an update.

Everyone has a different experience with their name and pronouns. Those experiences can be good or bad and only the individual can truly know how they were affected. Many people have never thought about their name and pronouns before. Others are constantly thinking about who they are and how they want to be perceived. But it doesn't matter how much someone cares about this, respecting a person's name and pronouns is necessary and fundamental to good communication.

A good habit to get into is to always give your own name and pronouns when introducing yourself and then ask for the name and pronouns of others. Knowing how everyone wants to be referred to is key to good communication. You can help empower someone and avoid causing anyone harm by using their name and correct pronouns. Even if you have to ask multiple times, you are sincerely trying to express to that person that you actually want to get

to know them. Asking again can also be helpful because as a person grows and develops their name and pronouns may change. It is important to remember to never force someone to share their pronouns. Sometimes a person may not feel safe enough in certain situations to give out their pronouns and by not pushing them you are showing compassion.

If you do not know what pronouns to use for someone, the most respectful way to handle this is to use the gender-neutral pronouns, they, them, theirs. It is understandable that singular they and pronouns you haven't heard of can take some getting used to. What matters is showing that you want to change and are trying your best to use the right pronouns. The unfortunate part of meeting new people is that not all encounters are good ones. There are people, including myself, who have trauma surrounding people using the wrong name and pronouns. Mistakes happen but please don't make a big deal of it. All you have to do is say sorry, switch to the correct pronoun, and move on. People notice when you put in sincere effort and appreciate it.

Another way you can make a difference is by avoiding overly gendered language. It is as easy as saying firefighter not fireman, y'all not you guys, and they not he or she. You can also use distinguished guests instead of ladies and gentlemen. Don't use Mr./Mrs. and sir/ma'am unless you know the person. The gender-neutral prefix Mx. (Pronounced mix) or Mer. can be used for professional settings.

My favorite quote is "No one can do everything, but everyone can do something" and I have been using it for years as a reminder to be my best self. I hope you feel empowered by my advice to be your best self as well.

Add pronouns to how you communicate

- Use the pronouns they, them, theirs if you don't know
- Practicing saying pronouns new to you
 - "They left their coat. I'll go give it to them"
 - "Ne took nir cat with nem"
- Avoid using gendered language.

An easy way to uplift those around you and show your support is to add your pronouns to your email signature or when making a nametag.

Feel free to reach out to myself or my fellow 2022 intern Alkemy if you want to discuss this topic further.

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Here are two videos on using pronouns:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7YOY42kQ9A> (35 seconds)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3jhJPPjEUE> (3 and half minutes)