



Creating an Inclusive Culture for Masters Swimmers - Use Of Pronouns

You might think pronouns might've been simple, but they haven't. We've evolved over the years to understand how best to use them.

In a [recent study](#) from the University of Pittsburgh, researchers reported that one in 10 students in over a dozen public high schools identified as gender diverse. Some of those teens will volunteer at USMS events or join USMS. Now is the perfect time to practice how to use correct pronouns so people feel respected and valued. Affirming our members' and volunteers' gender identity helps create an inclusive environment and will open the swim community to more people.

First things first: What is the difference between sex and gender?

Sex is assigned at birth, typically on the basis of primary sex factors that include sex chromosomes, hormones, expressions of hormones, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia.

Gender is a social construct and reflects the social and cultural role of gender characteristics within a given community. People often develop their gender identity and gender expression in response to their environment. In Western cultures, gender is traditionally divided along binary lines of man and woman. Those who do not change their assigned gender from birth are called "cisgender." The term transgender is used to refer to some individuals whose gender differs from their sex assigned at birth. Other [genders](#) include nonbinary, gender-neutral, omnigender, and many more. Gender is a spectrum. People use different labels for themselves to find and communicate their own identities. For example, some nonbinary people consider themselves trans, others do not.

Now -- why does using the correct pronouns matter?

How someone prefers to be addressed is determined by that person alone. Just as everyone has the right to use self-identified first names in place of legal names given at birth, everyone has the right to use gender pronouns that match their personal identity. Being misgendered or misnamed may leave a person feeling disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, and unseen. Intentional misgendering someone is not only offensive but harmful. This can be distressing and affect a person's mental health.

To help realize USMS's vision to make "swimming available for as many adults as possible," we need to create welcoming and inclusive environments. Swimming and most sports reflect a gender binary system, which makes it difficult for others to fit it at times. Using correct pronouns for all swimmers is an excellent and important starting point.



The good news is that you don't have to be an expert on identifying (or determining) other people's genders. You do need to know how to correctly use pronouns and avoid misgendering people. The only way to know a person's pronouns is to ask them. It's simple! Here are some tips:

- **Don't assume another person's gender or gender pronouns** by appearances, dress code, and behaviors. That means the type of suit doesn't equate to gender preference. Just because someone is representing the men's team doesn't make them a man.
- **Recognize that gender expression is fluid.** Exploring our identities is a lifelong process. How often have you wanted to talk to your younger self? For people going through their own transitions, they may be struggling internally with how they want to be seen by others and may change their pronouns several times as they figure out what makes them the happiest. Respect them and their process, including any changes in pronoun preferences.
- **Normalize the sharing of gender pronouns** by actively sharing your own. New teammate? "Hi! My name is Vicki, she/her. What's your name?"
- **Apologize if you call someone by the wrong pronoun.** How many times have you called someone by the wrong name or misspelled their name and have had to apologize? Mistakes happen. Simply correct the error and thank anyone who brings this to your attention. The recognition of a mistake and the correction is an essential tool for creating an inclusive environment.
- **Avoid binary-gendered language.** Try to refrain from addressing groups as "ladies and gentlemen" or "boys and girls" and instead use "everyone" or "team."
- **Help others to use correct pronouns**—and that includes coaches and parents. Correct someone if they have used the wrong pronoun. Most of the time, they will be appreciative. HOWEVER, if you observe someone purposely using the wrong pronoun, be an ally and call them out.
- **Practice. Practice. Practice.** Whether you're at the pool or your local watering hole, the more you practice, the better you'll get at using preferred pronouns. Just as when you're learning a new stroke or technique, you need to practice until it becomes intuitive.

And before you know it, you will be a pronoun pro in and out of the pool.

We would love to hear how you provided a welcoming team environment by using the correct pronouns. Email us at diversity@usmastersswimming.com



Other resources:

[Gender Identity and Pronouns - Onlea - What Will You Teach The World?](#)

[USMS Diversity & Inclusion Interactive Breakout Session: Gender and Sexual Orientation Diversity Webinar, October 21, 2021](#)

[Sex Assigned at Birth and Gender Identity: What Is The Difference?](#)

This article is truly a collaborative effort:

Jez Lee (they/them) swims with Marcia's Enthusiastic Masters of Oakland ([MEMO](#)). They began using they/them pronouns with close friends over two decades ago. Swimmers (older ones, too!) can be hesitant to talk about gender, concerned about judgmental reactions, bullying, and violence. Feeling accepted as part of a team can make a world of difference.

Kay McIntosh (they/he) swims with [Albany Armada Aquatics](#) and [Occidental Swim and Dive](#). They would like to note that talking about gender is not new or trendy; genders have existed outside men and women for centuries in Western and worldwide history.

Miriam Benjamin (she/her) is a USA Swimming- and USMS-certified coach with [Albany Armada Aquatics](#) and [MEMO](#).

Vicki Shu (she/her) is the chair of Pacific Masters' Diversity and Inclusion Committee, a member of the USMS Diversity and Inclusion Committee, and swims with [MEMO](#).