

# Trying on Something New: Her friend's gender identity is changing – how can she be supportive?

Dear C and Dr. B;

My friend Donny has me confused. We've known each other since high school and she has always dated guys, just like I have. When we were growing up, there just weren't as many "gender identities" out there. Being gay was gradually becoming more acceptable, but the idea of transsexuals gaining acceptance was basically unheard of. Now I know that transgender rights are even being defended in the military, but I don't think I knew it existed as a kid.

Imagine my surprise when Donny announced to me that she wants to be called Dannie from now on, and that she also doesn't want to be called she OR he. I don't know what to call my friend anymore. What am I supposed to do when asked, "Where is Dannie?" Say, "They are over there?"

I'm not judging, this is just weird and awkward. What's the socially correct thing to do, and is my friend going to be cruising gay bars now?

Terry

Dr. B says: There are a lot of new labels out there now, your friend might be pansexual, rather than transgender, but you didn't give enough information to narrow it down. All humans are naturally pansexual, which means they can be attracted to anyone, regardless of their sex or gender orientation.

Culture limits most expressions of people's desires, but given the right circumstances, these limitations fail. All young people are sexually curious, and if culture didn't limit this curiosity, there would be all kinds of experimentation and variations in relationships. Even with cultural limitations, studies show that all kinds of experimentation goes on in most colleges. I am not convinced that any labels are true or even help. You may lean toward one category at one point, but who you are attracted to can sometimes change. You might not normally be attracted to the same gender yet one day, you meet someone - and then you are.

There is less stigma on experimentation these days, but I don't see less anxiety around it, only different things people worry about, like the correct label or the correct way to express oneself or how to talk about it. People today don't want to be hemmed in or limited by labels themselves, yet they are often anxious about using the "correct label" when with other people. This can cause a lot of miscommunication. Happiness doesn't lie in the label you use. Get to know yourself, then find like-minded people. How you feel can change and you can change groups if need be.

We see everything through the lens of our cultural programming, but that doesn't make it true. All labels are problematic. Take race for example - skin color is no different than hair color or eye color. There is no such thing as race, but there is culture and that is a much more useful conversation.

C says: When I was in high school, we had two choices - you were either heterosexual, or you were

some loser/nerd that no one wanted to date. I asked my sister about it, just to make sure my memory was correct, and it was. Neither of us had even heard the term “gay” or knew what it meant until we went off to college.

In my personal opinion, labels are only useful if there’s a logical reason to standardize - like with screwdrivers. You don’t want someone handing you a flat head when you’re taking out a Phillips head screw. Otherwise, a label doesn’t really help in the long run when it comes to relationships and sex. Either you’re attracted, or you’re not. Either you fit or you don’t.

Trying to find an ideal mate is like trying on dresses at a rummage sale. Just like any adult who isn’t still a virgin, they’ve all been used. Obviously, they didn’t work out for somebody. They may have designer labels, or they may come from the J.C. Penny catalog - but you’ll never know if one fits unless you take a chance and try it on.

*You can visit Dr. B's blog at [drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com](http://drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com)*