



HEALTHY SEXUAL SOLUTIONS

## Transgender

### What is a Transgender?

Transgender is an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression, or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth.

Gender identity refers to a person's internal sense of being male, female, or something else; gender expression refers to the way a person communicates gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice, or body characteristics.

"Trans" is sometimes used as shorthand for "transgender." While transgender is generally a good term to use, not everyone whose appearance or behavior is gender-nonconforming will identify as a transgender person. The ways that transgender people are talked about in popular culture, academia, and science are constantly changing, particularly as individuals' awareness, knowledge, and openness about transgender people and their experiences grow.

Transgender persons have been documented in many indigenous, Western, and Eastern cultures and societies from antiquity until the present day. However, the meaning of gender nonconformity may vary from culture to culture.

It is difficult to accurately estimate the number of transgender people, mostly because there are no population studies that accurately and completely account for the range of gender identity and gender expression.

There is no single explanation for why some people are transgender. The diversity of transgender expression and experiences argues against any simple or unitary explanation. Many experts believe that biological factors such as genetic influences and prenatal hormone levels, early experiences, and experiences later in adolescence or adulthood may all contribute to the development of transgender identities.

Transgender is not a mental disorder. A psychological state is considered a mental disorder only if it causes significant distress or disability. Many transgender people do not experience their gender as distressing or disabling, which implies that identifying as transgender does not constitute a mental disorder. For these individuals, the significant problem is finding affordable resources, such as counseling, hormone therapy, medical procedures, and the social support necessary to freely express their gender identity and minimize discrimination. Many other obstacles may lead to distress, including a lack of acceptance within society, direct or indirect experiences with discrimination, or assault. These experiences may lead

many transgender people to suffer with anxiety, depression, or related disorders at higher rates than non-transgender persons.

In the United States, payment for health care treatment by insurance companies, Medicare, and Medicaid must be for a specific "disorder," defined as a condition within the *International Classification of Diseases (ICD)* or the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*. According to *DSM-IV*, people who experience intense, persistent gender incongruence can be given the diagnosis of gender identity disorder. This diagnosis is highly controversial among some mental health professionals and transgender communities. Some contend that the diagnosis inappropriately pathologizes gender noncongruence and should be eliminated. Others argue that it is essential to retain the diagnosis to ensure access to care.

## **Transgender Characteristics**

Transgender people experience their transgender identity in a variety of ways and may become aware of their transgender identity at any age. Some can trace their transgender identities and feelings back to their earliest memories. They may have vague feelings of "not fitting in" with people of their assigned sex or specific wishes to be something other than their assigned sex.

Others become aware of their transgender identities or begin to explore and experience gender-nonconforming attitudes and behaviors during adolescence or much later in life. Some embrace their transgender feelings, while others struggle with feelings of shame or confusion. Those who transition later in life may have struggled to fit in adequately as their assigned sex only to later face dissatisfaction with their lives.

Some transgender people, transsexuals in particular, experience intense dissatisfaction with their sex assigned at birth, physical sex characteristics, or the gender role associated with that sex. These individuals often seek gender-affirming treatments.

Parents may be concerned about a child who appears to be gender-nonconforming for a variety of reasons. Some children express a great deal of distress about their assigned sex at birth or the gender roles they are expected to follow. Some children experience difficult social interactions with peers and adults because of their gender expression. Parents may become concerned when what they believed to be a "phase" does not pass. Parents of gender-nonconforming children may need to work with schools and other institutions to address their children's particular needs and ensure their children's safety. It is helpful to consult with mental health and medical professionals familiar with gender issues in children to decide how to best address these concerns. It is not helpful to force the child to act in a more gender-conforming way. Peer support from other parents of gender-nonconforming children may also be helpful.

## Sex and Gender

Sex is assigned at birth, refers to one's biological status as either male or female, and is associated primarily with physical attributes such as chromosomes, hormone prevalence, and external and internal anatomy.

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for boys and men or girls and women. These influence the ways that people act, interact, and feel about themselves. While aspects of biological sex are similar across different cultures, aspects of gender may differ.

## Transgender Categories and Types

Many identities fall under the transgender umbrella. The term transsexual refers to people whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex. Often, transsexual people alter or wish to alter their bodies through hormones, surgery, and other means to make their bodies as congruent as possible with their gender identities. This process of transition through medical intervention is often referred to as sex or gender reassignment, but more recently is also referred to as gender affirmation.

People who were assigned female, but identify and live as male and alter or wish to alter their bodies through medical intervention to more closely resemble their gender identity are known as transsexual men or transmen (also known as female-to-male or FTM). Conversely, people who were assigned male, but identify and live as female and alter or wish to alter their bodies through medical intervention to more closely resemble their gender identity are known as transsexual women or transwomen (also known as male-to-female or MTF). Some individuals who transition from one gender to another prefer to be referred to as a man or a woman, rather than as transgender.

People who cross-dress wear clothing that is traditionally or stereotypically worn by another gender in their culture. They vary in how completely they cross-dress, from one article of clothing to fully cross-dressing. Those who cross-dress are usually comfortable with their assigned sex and do not wish to change it. Cross-dressing is a form of gender expression and is not necessarily tied to erotic activity. Cross-dressing is not indicative of sexual orientation. The degree of societal acceptance for cross-dressing varies for males and females. In some cultures, one gender may be given more latitude than another for wearing clothing associated with a different gender.

The term drag queens generally refers to men who dress as women for the purpose of entertaining others at bars, clubs, or other events. The term drag kings refers to women who dress as men for the purpose of entertaining others at bars, clubs, or other events.

Genderqueer is a term that some people use who identify their gender as falling outside the binary constructs of "male" and "female." They may define their gender as falling somewhere on a continuum between male and female, or they may define it as wholly different from these terms. They may also request that pronouns be used to refer to them that are neither masculine nor feminine, such as "zie" instead of "he" or "she," or "hir" instead of "his" or "her." Some genderqueer people do not identify as transgender.

Other categories of transgender people include androgynous, multigendered, gender nonconforming, third gender, and two-spirit people. Exact definitions of these terms vary from person to person and may change over time, but often include a sense of blending or alternating genders. Some people who use these terms to describe themselves see traditional, binary concepts of gender as restrictive.

## **Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation**

Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Sexual orientation refers to an individual's enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to another person, whereas gender identity refers to one's internal sense of being male, female, or something else. Transgender people may be straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or asexual, just as nontransgender people can be. Some recent research has shown that a change or a new exploration period in partner attraction may occur during the process of transition. However, transgender people usually remain as attached to loved ones after transition as they were before transition.

Transgender people usually label their sexual orientation using their gender as a reference. For example, a transgender woman, or a person who is assigned male at birth and transitions to female, who is attracted to other women would be identified as a lesbian or gay woman. Likewise, a transgender man, or a person who is assigned female at birth and transitions to male, who is attracted to other men would be identified as a gay man.

## **Transsexuals and Gender Transition**

Transitioning from one gender to another is a complex process and may involve transition to a gender that is neither traditionally male nor female. People who transition often start by expressing their preferred gender in situations where they feel safe. They typically work up to living full time as members of their preferred gender by making many changes a little at a time.

While there is no "right" way to transition genders, there are some common social changes transgender people experience that may involve one or more of the following: adopting the appearance of the desired sex through changes in clothing and grooming, adopting a new name, changing sex designation on identity documents (if possible), using hormone therapy treatment, and/or undergoing medical procedures that modify their body to conform with their gender identity.

Every transgender person's process or transition differs. Because of this, many factors may determine how the individual wishes to live and express their gender identity. Finding a qualified mental health professional who is experienced in providing affirmative care for transgender people is an important first step. A qualified professional can provide guidance and referrals to other helping professionals. Connecting with other transgender people through peer support groups and transgender community organizations is also helpful.