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Answers to Your Questions About Transgender Individuals and Gender Identity

What does transgender mean?

Transgender is an umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity (sense of themselves as male or female) or gender expression differs from that usually associated with their birth sex. Many transgender people live part-time or full-time as members of the other gender. Broadly speaking, anyone whose identity, appearance, or behavior falls outside of conventional gender norms can be described as transgender. However, not everyone whose appearance or behavior is gender-atypical will identify as a transgender person.

What is the difference between sex and gender?

Sex refers to biological status as male or female. It includes physical attributes such as sex chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, internal reproductive structures, and external genitalia. *Gender* is a term that is often used to refer to ways that people act, interact, or feel about themselves, which are associated with boys/men and girls/women. While aspects of biological sex are the same across different cultures, aspects of gender may not be.

What are some categories or types of transgender people?

Transsexuals are transgender people who live or wish to live full time as members of the gender opposite to their birth sex. Biological females who wish to live and be recognized as men are called female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals or transsexual men. Biological males who wish to live and be recognized as women are called male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals or transsexual women. Transsexuals usually seek medical interventions, such as hormones and surgery, to make their bodies as congruent as possible with their preferred gender. The process of transitioning from one gender to the other is called sex reassignment or gender reassignment.

Cross-dressers or transvestites comprise the most numerous transgender group. Cross-dressers wear the clothing of the other sex. They vary in how completely they dress (from one article of clothing to fully cross-dressing) as well as in their motives for doing so. Some cross-dress to express cross-gender feelings or identities; others cross-dress for fun, for emotional comfort, or for sexual arousal. The great majority of cross-dressers are biological males, most of whom are sexually attracted to women.

Drag queens and drag kings are, respectively, biological males and females who present part-time as members of the other sex primarily to perform or entertain. Their performances may include singing, lip-syncing, or dancing. Drag performers may or may not identify as transgender. Many drag queens and kings identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Other categories of transgender people include *androgynous*, *bigendered*, and *gender queer* people. Exact definitions of these terms vary from person to person, but often include a sense of blending or alternating genders. Some people who use these terms to describe themselves see traditional concepts of gender as restrictive.

Have transgender people always existed?

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

Why are some people transgender?

There is no one generally accepted explanation for why some people are transgender. The diversity of transgender expression argues against any simple or unitary explanation. Many experts believe that biological factors such as genetic influences and prenatal hormone levels, early experiences in a person's family of origin, and other social influences can all contribute to the development of transgender behaviors and identities.

How prevalent are transgender people?

It is difficult to accurately estimate the prevalence of transgender people in Western countries. As many as 2-3% of biological males engage in cross-dressing, at least occasionally. Current estimates of the prevalence of transsexualism are about 1 in 10,000 for biological males and 1 in 30,000 for biological females. The number of people in other transgender categories is unknown.

What is the relationship between transgender and sexual orientation?

People generally experience gender identity and sexual orientation as two different things. Sexual orientation refers to one's sexual attraction to men, women, both,

or neither, whereas gender identity refers to one's sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender. Usually people who are attracted to women prior to transition continue to be attracted to women after transition, and people who are attracted to men prior to transition continue to be attracted to men after transition. That means, for example, that a biologic male who is attracted to females will be attracted to females after transitioning, and she may regard herself as a lesbian.

How do transgender people experience their transgender feelings?

Transgender people experience their transgender feelings in a variety of ways. Some can trace their transgender identities or gender-atypical attitudes and behaviors back to their earliest memories. Others become aware of their transgender identities or begin to experience gender-atypical attitudes and behaviors much later in life. Some transgender people accept or embrace their transgender feelings, while others struggle with feelings of shame or confusion. Some transgender people, transsexuals in particular, experience intense dissatisfaction with their birth sex or with the gender role associated with that sex. These individuals often seek sex reassignment.

What should parents do if their child appears to be transgender or gender-atypical?

Parents may be concerned about a child who appears to be gender-atypical for a variety of reasons. Some children express a great deal of distress about their assigned gender roles or the sex of their bodies. 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 seem to pass. Parents of gender-atypical children may need to work with schools and other institutions to address their children's particular needs and to ensure their children's safety. It is often helpful to consult with a mental health professional familiar with gender issues in children to decide how to best address these concerns. In most cases it is not helpful to simply force the child to act in a more gender-typical way. Peer support from other parents of gender variant children may also be helpful.

How do transsexuals transition from one gender to the other?

Transitioning from one gender to another is a complex process. 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.

Gender transition typically involves adopting the appearance of the desired sex through changes in clothing and grooming, adoption of a name typical of the desired sex, change of sex designation on identity docu-

ments, treatment with cross-sex hormones, surgical alteration of secondary sex characteristics to approximate those of the desired sex, and in biological males, removal of facial hair with electrolysis or laser treatments. Finding a qualified mental health professional to provide guidance and referrals to other helping professionals is often an important first step in gender transition. Connecting with other transgender people through peer support groups and transgender community organizations is also very helpful.

The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA), a professional organization devoted to the treatment of transgender people, publishes *The Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorders*, which offers recommendations for the provision of sex reassignment procedures and services.

Is being transgender a mental disorder?

A psychological condition is considered a mental disorder only if it causes distress or disability. Many transgender people do not experience their transgender feelings and traits to be distressing or disabling, which implies that being transgender does not constitute a mental disorder per se. For these people, the significant problem is finding the resources, such as hormone treatment, surgery, and the social support they need, in order to express their gender identity and minimize discrimination. However, some transgender people do find their transgender feelings to be distressing or disabling. This is particularly true of transsexuals, who experience their gender identity as incongruent with their birth sex or with the gender role associated with that sex. This distressing feeling of incongruity is called *gender dysphoria*.

According to the diagnostic standards of American psychiatry, as set forth in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, people who experience intense, persistent gender dysphoria can be given the diagnosis of *Gender Identity Disorder*. This diagnosis is highly controversial among some mental health professionals and transgender people. Some contend that the diagnosis inappropriately pathologizes gender variance and should be eliminated. Others argue that, because the health care system in the United States requires a diagnosis to justify medical or psychological treatment, it is essential to retain the diagnosis to ensure access to care.

What kinds of mental health problems do transgender people face?

Transgender people experience the same kinds of mental health problems that nontransgender people do. However, the stigma, discrimination, and internal conflict that many transgender people experience may place them at increased risk for certain mental health problems. Discrimination, lack of social support, and inadequate access to care can exacerbate mental health problems in transgender people, while support from

peers, family, and helping professionals may act as protective factors.

What kinds of discrimination do transgender people face?

Antidiscrimination laws in most U.S. cities and states do not protect transgender people from discrimination based on gender identity or gender expression.

Consequently, transgender people in most cities and states can be denied housing or employment, lose custody of their children, or have difficulty achieving legal recognition of their marriages, solely because they are transgender. Many transgender people are the targets of hate crimes. The widespread nature of discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression can cause transgender people to feel unsafe or ashamed, even when they are not directly victimized.

How can I be supportive of transgender family members, friends, or significant others?

- Educate yourself about transgender issues.
- Be aware of your attitudes concerning people with gender-atypical appearance or behavior.
- Use names and pronouns that are appropriate to the person's gender presentation and identity; if in doubt, ask their preference.
- Don't make assumptions about transgender people's sexual orientation, desire for surgical or hormonal treatment, or other aspects of their identity or transition plans. If you have a reason to need to know, ask.
- Don't confuse gender dysphoria with gender expression: Gender-dysphoric males may not always appear stereotypically feminine, and not all gender-variant men are gender-dysphoric; gender-dysphoric females

may not always appear stereotypically masculine, and not all gender-variant women are gender-dysphoric.

- Keep the lines of communication open with the transgender person in your life.
- Get support in processing your own reactions. It can take some time to adjust to seeing someone who is transitioning in a new way. Having someone close to you transition will be an adjustment and can be challenging, especially for partners, parents, and children.
- Seek support in dealing with your feelings. You are not alone. Mental health professionals and support groups for family, friends, and significant others of transgender people can be useful resources.

Where can I find more information about transgender issues?

American Psychological Association

750 First Street, NE
Washington DC, 20002
202-336-5500
lgbc@apa.org (e-mail)
www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/transgender

The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc.

World Professional Association of Transgender
1300 South Second Street, Suite 180
Minneapolis, MN 55454
612-624-9397
612-624-9541 (fax)
hbigda@hbigda.org (e-mail)
www.hbigda.org

FTMInternational (FTM means Female-to-Male)

740A 14th St. #216
San Francisco, CA 94114
877-267-1440
info@ftmi.org (e-mail)
www.ftmi.org

Gender Public Advocacy Coalition

1743 Connecticut Ave., NW
Fourth Floor
Washington, DC 20009
202-462-6610
gpac@gpac.org (e-mail)
www.gpac.org

National Center for Transgender Equality

1325 Massachusetts Ave., Suite 700
Washington, DC 20005
202-903-0112
202-393-2241 (fax)
www.nctequality.org

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) Transgender Network (TNET)

1726 M Street, NW
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202-467-8180
info@pflag.org (e-mail)
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