

Definitions & Common Questions about Transgendered People

Some definitions to get you started

Gender: The role a person takes in social interactions, as in man or woman, masculine or feminine, he or she. Gender involves a person's internal feelings of gender identity as well as external gender role or gender expression. Gender is not a synonym for sex, although the sex and gender of most people are congruent. Sex is what you have between your legs, gender is what you have between your ears.

Transgendered: This term originally meant a pre-operative transsexual who has no desire to have the sexual reassignment surgery (SRS). It later became an umbrella term for transvestites, transsexuals, female and male impersonators, drag queens, intersexuals, gender dysphorics, and those that do not fit any gender label. Transgendered best describes someone who does not fit into the standard male or female gender patterns accepted by society.

Transsexual: People who have a strong and persistent feeling that they are living in the wrong sex. The clinical term for transsexualism is gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria means that the gender identity enforced by society on the basis of biological sex at birth is difficult to bear and causes the individual significant emotional stress and discomfort.

Transvestite: (also referred to as a cross-dresser) is a person who adopts the clothing and sometimes the behavior of the opposite sex. Transvestitism is primarily a male practice. This is probably because it is more acceptable for women to wear men's clothing than for men to cross-dress as women. It is a misconception that cross-dressing is done only for sexual arousal. There are many different categories of transvestitism which include drag queens/kings, who dress with the intent to entertain; fetishistic transvestites, who are sexually stimulated by certain objects; and shaman, who cross-dress during religious/spiritual ceremonies.

Gender Presentation/Gender Expression: a common term used by individuals who are transgendered to describe the external presentation or appearance of a person, as it relates to the traditional stereotypes of "man" (or "boy") and "woman" (or "girl".) A person's gender expression includes appearance, dress, mannerisms, speech patterns, hairstyle, and social interactions.

Intersexual: A term preferred by people born with both female and male characteristics; the more commonly used term in history is hermaphrodite. Children born with obvious intersexed characteristics are often operated on as an infant to remove whichever characteristics the family or surgeon decides should disappear. This may or may not coincide with which gender the child considers him/herself to be.

Sexual reassignment surgery (SRS): The term used for surgeries to alter the gender of an individual. SRS can involve just one, any combination, or all procedures. Preparatory and follow-up hormonal treatment is almost always given, and male-to-female (M2F) transsexuals often undergo long, expensive, painful electrolysis. For M2F transsexuals these procedures include amputation of testicles and most of the penis, inversion of the penis skin into a vagina, breast implants, tracheal shaves, and/or labiaplasty. For female-to-male (F2M) transsexuals SRS procedures include a mastectomy, a hysterectomy, and/or a phalloplasty (the creation of a penis and scrotum).

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

How many transgendered people are there and who are they?

There are no actual statistics on the numbers of transvestites in the world at large. Researchers estimate that the percentage of men who have cross-dressed is quite high, perhaps as high as 50 percent. While transsexualism is estimated to occur at a much lower rate, perhaps one in 35,000 males and one in 100,000 females. Estimates vary widely. Many factors including discrimination and harassment can cause the under reporting of transgendered status.

What is a pre-/post-/non-op transsexual?

"Pre-op" or pre-operative means someone who has begun the procedure to reassign their sex but has not had the surgery. This term covers those transsexuals who have just begun sexual reassignment to those near surgery. A "post-op" or post-operative transsexual is someone who has had sexual reassignment surgery done. "Non-op" or non-operative transsexual means a person who has had all the hormonal/surgical treatments, except the genital surgery, and has no desire to proceed with the surgery or lack the financial means by which to complete the operation.

What's the differences between sexual orientation and gender identity?

Sexual Orientation is which sex you find erotically attractive: opposite (heterosexual), same (homosexual), or both (bisexual).

Gender Identity is how you see yourself socially: man, woman, or a combination of both. One may have a penis but prefer to relate socially as a woman, or one may have a vagina but prefer to relate as a man.

Are all Transsexuals gay?

Sexual orientation and gender identity are two distinct characteristics of a person. One does not determine or influence the other. Transsexuals may be gay, straight, or bisexual.

Can transgender urges be changed or cured?

Usually, no. Some transvestites and transsexuals (usually male) go through phases where they throw out all their clothes, makeup, shoes, etc. and refuse to dress as women any longer. This is called "purging". These people frequently go out and purchase new clothing soon afterwards. Some people do stop cross dressing altogether. This action can often cause high levels of anxiety and stress in a person.

What should I do if someone I know is transgendered?

1. Give them the same respect you wish for yourself: Transgender people are no less deserving of respect than anyone else. Though they may not respect themselves as much as possible due to abuse and adverse programming over time, help them to respect themselves by showing your respect for them. If you don't feel it at first, pretend until you do.

2. Help defend their dignity: Like the first black student in a white school 30 years ago, the transgender person today faces a population that finds them strange and frightening. Perhaps even you find them strange and frightening. If so, try putting your discomfort on hold for awhile, and see if it doesn't dissipate over time. They're just people, different in some ways, but then so are you and everyone else. Don't tolerate other people's intolerance for transgender difference any more than you would tolerate intolerance for racial difference. Instead, teach them respect for individual courage, exploration, and diversity in all things.

3. Remember: an obvious target for abuse can wind up looking like a troublemaker through no fault of their own. Don't fall prey to the age-old trap of punishing the victim for the effects of the conflict they seem to attract. Follow the transgender person's example of courage and stand up for what is right.

4. Listen: The transgender person will tell you how best to handle unfamiliar or confusing situations. Let them tell you what they want, and accommodate their desire for most appropriate pronouns, grouping (boy/girl), etc. Allow the transgender person to affiliate according to their own wishes, never by force.

5. Educate yourself and others: Take the time to find out what transgenderism is all about. Gender is a fundamental component of our personalities that is usually taken completely for granted. Take advantage of the opportunity presented by the transgendered person to challenge you and others' beliefs about gender. Note how gender transgression stimulates emotions, and examine for fallacy the beliefs that give rise to the emotion.

What has been done legally to protect transgendered individuals?

In some states, such as California, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, it is now possible to change the gender on birth certificates after an individual has undergone SRS. In addition to this, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Oregon along with several U.S. cities, have adopted non-discrimination legislation which includes transgendered people. Several major employers such as American Airlines and Lucent Technologies have adopted similar policies which include transgendered and intersex employees.

Compiled and adapted from a variety of sources including GCN Online, Iota Chi Sigma of Indianapolis, sexuality.org, tgender.org and Michigan State University's The Alliance.