



Transgender 201

Answers to frequently asked questions
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What is gender?

There is gender assigned at birth, which is based on external genitalia. There is also gender identity, which is an internal understanding of our gender. For the vast majority of people, assigned gender and gender identity are synonymous, or cisgender. However, for a small percentage of individuals, assigned gender and gender identity do not align. The medical term for this condition is gender dysphoria or gender incongruity. Individuals with gender dysphoria experience a disconnect between their assigned gender and gender identity, and are referred to as transgender individuals, which can include nonbinary, gender fluid, and agender individuals. Though people with gender dysphoria can be considered transgender, not all transgender individuals have gender dysphoria.

What causes gender dysphoria?

For decades, gender dysphoria was misclassified as a sexual disorder. Within the last 15 years it has become more clearly understood as a gender issue and not related to homosexuality, as some transgender individuals are heterosexual, while others are gay or lesbian, just as in the general population. Ongoing research is providing more insight into transgender concerns every day.

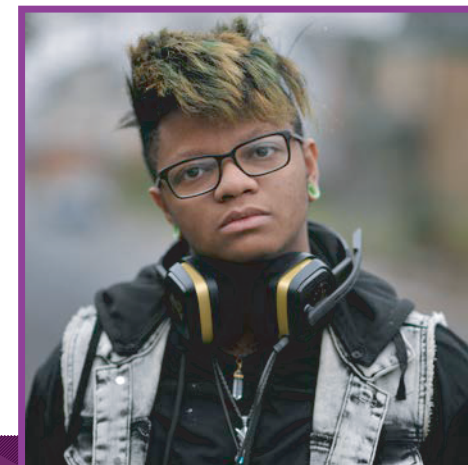
It is known that as a fetus develops, it begins as a female in appearance. At approximately 6 weeks in utero, hormones are released and the baby's physical sex develops. At approximately 6 months in utero, another wave of hormones is released as the brain develops. It is thought that the baby's gender identity is then influenced. One theory for an underlying cause of gender dysphoria is the possibility of different hormones being released at these integral times, resulting in future gender dysphoria (i.e. testosterone being released later in development when the fetus with XX chromosomes was not exposed to testosterone at 6 weeks). Another theory is that endocrine disruptors, which are chemicals that affect our hormones, interfere at this stage, or in infancy. Brain MRI imaging suggests that in transgender individuals the regions of the brain that are distinctly "male" or "female" function more closely to that of their gender identity, rather than that of their biological sex. While these studies provide insight to the underlying factors, they are not designed to be used as diagnostic tools. The formation of gender identity is complex and research is still in its infancy.

When does an individual know they are transgender?

It varies. Gender awareness can become apparent in children as young as 2 years of age. Puberty can also be a trigger. Some transgender individuals may not transition until adulthood. Very often transgender people struggle with finding the words to express their identity, and the courage to communicate their feelings to friends and family. Although their transition may seem sudden to you, it is likely something that they have been struggling to express for months or years.

Is being transgender just a "phase?"

Some prepubescent children who identify as transgender may shift to identifying with their assigned gender, commonly known as desisting. The percentage of children who desist is being revisited as previous research did not appropriately distinguish between children who were transgender and those who just preferred to play or dress in a gender nonconforming manner. This led to a potentially misleadingly high percentage of children who desist, when in actuality that percentage is much lower. Medical professionals currently believe that if a child is insistent, persistent, and consistent with their identity, it is unlikely to shift. In regards to teens and adults, if their feelings persist for 6 months from the time of their onset, their gender identity is unlikely to shift. Recent studies show that transgender children supported in their gender identity do not experience any marked increase in depression or anxiety. Transgender children not allowed to live as they identify, however, are at increased risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.



What does it mean to transition?

When a transgender individual expresses their gender identity, it is referred to as transitioning. Transitioning differs for each person. It is an individual process that evolves over time and may or may not include the following:

- Change in appearance, including hair and dress
- Change in the use of pronouns and name
- Medical intervention, including hormone treatment and/or surgery

What should I know about transgender individuals?

Transgender individuals have historically been misunderstood and mistreated. As a result, they are at extremely high risk for sexual, physical, and psychological abuse. Suicidal thoughts have been reported in as many as 77% of these individuals, with suicide attempts reaching beyond 40%. In contrast, transgender youth and adults in a supportive, loving environment have suicide rates comparable to the general population. The use of the individual's chosen name and pronouns play a large part in reducing dysphoria as do family and community respect and support.

Who is transgender?

Transgender individuals come from all walks of life. Gender dysphoria is not limited to any one race, culture, religion, or socio-economic background.

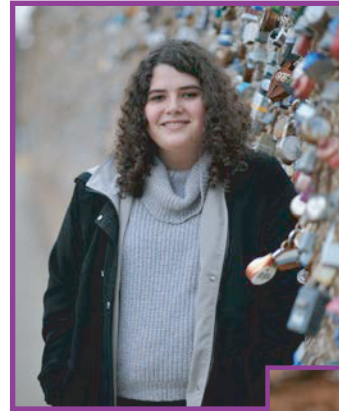
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How can I best support transgender people?

Education is the key to understanding and supporting your friends and/or loved ones. There are organizations such as PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and Gender Spectrum that offer support groups for family and friends of transgender people.

Some helpful things to consider include:

- Understand that they know better than anyone where on the gender spectrum they lie.
- Respect their chosen pronouns and name.
- Do not use their birth name otherwise known as a deadname.
- Refrain from asking a transgender individual a question that you would not ask a cisgender person with whom you have a similar relationship.
 - For example, you would not ask a coworker for details about their genitals. It is equally inappropriate to ask a transgender person genitalia questions.



Resources

UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh Gender and Sexual Development Program
chp.edu
412-692-6677

Persad Center
persadcenter.org
Pittsburgh, PA
412-441-9786

PFLAG Pittsburgh
pflagpgh.org
National: pflag.org

Trans Lifeline
translifeline.org

Washington County Gay Straight Alliance
wcgsa.org

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Family Acceptance Project
familyproject.sfsu.edu

Gender Spectrum
genderspectrum.org

The Trevor Project
thetrevorproject.org

It Gets Better Project
itgetsbetter.org