

BEING TRANS

THE BASICS



Introduction

Discovering you're transgender, gender diverse and/or non-binary (TGDNB) often occurs when you come to the realisation that your authentic sense of your own gender does not match up with your biological sex.

Discrimination and negative attitudes towards being trans often accompany religious beliefs and cultural values and trans people frequently experience discomfort and impaired functioning as a result of this. While trans people do have resources and coping strategies to deal with discrimination and negative attitudes, it remains one of the main challenges that TGDNB people work to develop coping strategies to deal with.

Being trans is not about your sexual orientation. Being trans is about how you feel in terms of identity and specifically about how that relates to the expectations of gender in society.

Being trans is often understood as an umbrella term for people who do not conform to typically accepted gender roles for the sex they were assigned at birth. The term "transgender" is commonly understood to encompass as many groups of gender diverse people as possible. However, many of these groups individually don't identify with the term.

Trans people often seek to adopt a gender presentation that better aligns with their internal authentic sense of gender, though this is not always the case and not a condition for being trans.



Terminology

These changes range from clothes, preferred identity markers, name, vocal presentation to hormonal and even surgical changes. The entire process of switching from an assigned gender to one that affirms the lived experience of a trans person is referred to as transition, and can take several years. The hormonal and surgical changes are collectively referred to as gender reassignment therapy and can include oestrogen or testosterone hormone replacement therapy, and various surgical procedures.

Trans people usually prefer to be referred to by those gender pronouns associated with their gender identity. For example, a trans man is someone who was assigned female at birth on the basis of his external genitalia, and has transitioned to a masculine gender role which may include a masculinised body. He may use male pronouns.

Trans people are sometimes referred to as 'female-to-male' for a trans man or 'male-to-female' for a trans woman. These terms may also be abbreviated as 'M2F', 'F2M', 'MTF', 'FTM', 'F to M', or 'transwoman' and 'transman'. For gender diverse and non-binary trans people 'they' and 'them' are frequently used as pronouns. If you are unsure about how to address someone try using their name instead of male, female or neutral pronouns until you receive clarification or it is appropriate to ask.

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Causes

The cause of being trans is an area of particular interest for many physicians, psychologists, other health professionals, trans people and their family and friends. Currently, there are numerous scientific explanations of the cause of being trans, linking the cause to genetics, brain structure and function, and prenatal androgen exposure; in addition other theories have proposed linking the cause to psychological and behavioural reasons. These theories are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

While it can be worthwhile reflecting on the rich genetic and/or biological basis that make up trans people, attempting to explain or reduce trans people to biological causes is deeply problematic. Trans people themselves frequently find themselves drawn into conversations about the cause of being trans. As fascinating as some people may find trans people and their identity, talking about the cause of being trans with trans and gender diverse people can be taxing. It is worth noting that the history of transgender and gender diverse people arises out of prejudice and discrimination where so-called scientific theories of the time were used to punish, restrict and to harm.

Numbers

It's difficult to give a definitive answer to the question, "how many trans and gender diverse people are there in Australia?" This is for a number of reason such as;

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lack of clear definitions; a lack of collected data; a reluctance for TGD people to identify in the face of stigmatisation and discrimination. As a general guide the Gender Centre estimates that TGD people make up approximately 1% of the population.

Transition

For many, 'transition' (to take steps to live as one's authentic self), may be the only way forward to avoid a life of psychological torment. This process is frequently assisted by therapeutic counselling and/or therapy to help process a life of gender diversity and/or to help acclimatise to and manage the difficulties associated with moving into a gender that you are unfamiliar with. Although you may have felt authentically male, you may not know what it is like to live socially as a male. It can also mean treatment involving hormone therapy and surgery, though neither treatments necessarily make you more or less trans.

Transition does not change the gender identity of the individual concerned, rather, it confirms their core gender identity by bringing their sex characteristics, especially their visible ones, and their gender identity into harmony. Research indicates that this treatment is highly successful. **Informed Consent** and **Gender Affirming Care**, the two best approaches used to help in transition recommend counselling as part of the process to help acclimatise to a new gender identity and make safe and affirming choices.



Consequences

Trans people challenge 'normative' gender roles and often face a considerable amount of rejection by family, friends, and many in society. This rejection, although somewhat different from the discrimination, harassment, vilification and violence discussed in our **Anti-Discrimination Transgender Information** fact sheet, may be gradually reducing as society becomes more aware of trans and gender diverse people in general, however it is unfortunately still quite common.

The anxiety, depression and uncertainty experienced by trans people is frequently an aspect of the enormous life change that goes along with transitioning genders. As with any huge life event counselling and psychological support can be immensely helpful for trans people and their families.

Some people who have transitioned enter into traditional social institutions such as marriage and parenting. Some adopt or provide foster care for children. Some trans people have children from before transition. Some of these children continue living with their transitioning/transitioned parent, or retain close contact with them, with no harm to these children in any way. Trans parents and parents of trans children may encounter specific issues related to community confusion, curiosity or rejection. Partners of trans people may experience confusion over their own self-identification, especially in relation to sexuality and may also feel a need to discuss their confusion or concerns with a professional that may be able to assist. Children with trans parents, no matter what their age, and parents with adult trans children may encounter issues specific to their relationship with their trans loved-one. Counselling, referrals and other support are excellent support steps to help trans people let go of old and outdated parts of their lives and come to terms with the next part of their journey.



Options

Psychological techniques that attempt to alter gender identity to one considered appropriate for the person's assigned sex are ineffective and dangerous. The widely-recognised *Standards of Care* for the Health of Trans, gender diverse, and Gender Nonconforming People note that sometimes the only reasonable and effective course of treatment for trans people is to go through gender reassignment. The need for treatment is emphasised by the high rate of mental illness, including depression, anxiety, and various addictions, as well as a higher suicide rates among untreated trans people than in the general population.

Most advocates and caregivers note that mental health issues are not usually related to a gender diverse identity, but because of the social and cultural impact on the gender diverse. Some trans people reject the counselling that is recommended by the *Standards of Care* because they don't consider their gender identity to be a psychological problem and this is a legitimate option. However supports are highly recommended before undertaking this journey. A trans or gender diverse adult may commence medical treatment beginning with hormone replacement therapy or hormone blockers after discussing options with a GP. Individuals may undergo some, all, or none of the medical procedures available, depending on personal feelings, health, income, and other considerations.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) causes the development of many of the secondary sexual characteristics of the desired sex. However, many of the existing primary and secondary sexual characteristics cannot be reversed by HRT.

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For example, HRT can induce breast growth for trans women but cannot reduce breasts for trans men. HRT can prompt facial hair growth for trans men, but cannot regress facial hair for trans women. HRT may, however, reverse some characteristics, such as distribution of body fat and muscle, as well as menstruation in trans men. Generally, those traits that are easily reversible will revert upon cessation of hormonal treatment, unless chemical or surgical castration has occurred, though for many trans people, surgery is required to obtain satisfactory physical characteristics.

For more information about Masculinising and Feminising Hormone Replacement Therapy, please refer to the Gender Centre's specific fact sheets covering these topics in more detail. Gender affirmation surgery (GAS) refers to the surgical and medical procedures undertaken to align a trans individual's physical appearance and genital anatomy with their gender identity. GAS may encompass any surgical procedures which will assist in reshaping a male body into a body with a more female appearance or vice versa. For more information about **Masculinising and Feminising Surgery** Options, please refer to the Gender Centre's specific fact sheets covering these topics in more detail.

Legal Recognition

The degree of legal recognition provided to trans people varies widely throughout the world but in Australia, the Federal and New South Wales State legal systems recognise three legal gender markers (M, F, and X).

Birth Certificate

Birth Certificates fall within the jurisdiction of each Australian State. All Australian jurisdictions now recognise the affirmed sex of an individual after surgery. New South Wales does not currently permit a change of sex on birth certificates unless a sex affirmation procedure has taken place, however in October 2011 a High Court decision granted two Western Australian trans men the right to have their birth certificates record their sex as male without the need for invasive surgery. In March 2014, the ACT Government made it legal for a trans person to change the sex on their birth certificate without the need for invasive surgery. They were followed by Tasmania and Victoria in 2019.

Passport

The Australian Passport Office issues passports in which citizens can nominate their official sex as male, female or indeterminate (X), without having to undergo surgery as proof of a sex change. The September 2011 changes to the Australian Passport Act require trans people to supply a doctor's letter of support to obtain a passport in what they consider to be their true gender. For more information, please see the "Documents of Identity" Fact Sheet.



Marriage

Marriage law was changed in 2017 to include same sex couples. In 2018, NSW ended its forced divorce requirements where trans people had to divorce their spouses to change sex marker on their birth certificate.

Children

Occasionally, children may express an incongruence between gender identity and their genital sex, but their discomfort is not always easy to identify. Symptoms of unease with the assigned gender role and the visible sex appearance are often only apparent to the individuals concerned and may not even be understood by them. If these children are unable to articulate their unease, their discomfort may grow through adolescence and into adulthood. Families and society can easily fall in to the trap of reinforcing gender roles in ignorance of a young persons underlying gender identity.

However, some children are able to express strong gender diverse identification, and sometimes insist on living in the opposite gender role. In particular, the increasing disgust with the development of secondary sex characteristics experienced by young people during puberty may be taken as a strong indication that gender diverse identification will persist into adulthood as a trans identity.

Hormone blocking treatment can sometimes be given, before pubertal changes become apparent. This allows young people to have more time to decide which gender they are able to achieve lasting personal comfort.

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There is no evidence that raising children in a gender role different from that expected of their assigned sex at birth causes gender variance, nor can strong gender diverse identification be overridden by raising children in strict accordance with a gender role that is expected of their sex assigned at birth.

Those who are not assisted in adolescence may continue to struggle to conform; they may embark on relationships, marriages and parenthood in an attempt to conform to expectations by suppressing their core gender identity. Ultimately, however, they may be unable to continue with the charade of presenting themselves as something they know they are not. The artificiality of their situation may drive individuals to seek treatment to help minimise the mismatch between their brain and their body. Trans people often experience an overwhelming need to live in accordance with their internal reality. Until this is achieved, personal discomfort may be such that it leads to unhappiness, severe depression and even suicidal feelings. Disclosure of one's true gender identity is often referred to as 'coming out' or 'letting in'. 'Coming out/ letting in' can be extremely stressful, despite the positive effects that one's disclosure usually brings. Disclosure of one's true gender identity can also be drawn out over a long period of time as often there are many people to tell; from partners, family and friends, to employers and work colleagues.

Sometimes others may be unaware that a person has been exploring their gender, and also may not be familiar with trans and/or gender diversity. There may be ongoing discussions with families, friends or professionals as a part of processing a trans disclosure. The Gender Centre provides a counselling service that is available to partners, family and friends of trans people either on their own or with their loved ones present. We also provide a number of kits, fact sheets, a library and online resources aimed at making the disclosure process as positive and respectful of an individual's needs as possible.

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Because trans people have historically been marginalised, coming out remains a challenge for most that frequently leads to a backlash of discrimination and homophobic/transphobic violence. The disclosure process can also be described as part of an individual's journey to forming their own true identity. It can be a liberating experience or an emancipation from oppression, a means towards feeling pride instead of shame, and often a source of much needed self-esteem.

Euphoria

Many trans people exist in the world. Many are in the process of coming to terms with their identity and with the possibility of transition.

The truth is that many trans people lead successful, fully functional lives.

The things that makes a person successful however, isn't necessarily how far they've gone in a career, how much money they've made or how attractive they are. Those that are able to function as happy, healthy and confident individuals, who engage meaningfully with the wider community, and are able to roll with the ups and downs of everyday life are the most important examples of success. There are many, many people that have explored their gender, transitioned, and gone on to have successful careers, relationships and find fulfilment in other aspects of life.



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victim of crime advocacy

youth and family support

information and referrals

counselling

advocacy

groups

accommodation

street outreach

case management

speech pathology

needle syringe program

HIV and Hep C testing (DBS)

The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities in NSW which enhance the ability of people exploring their gender identity to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to gender explorers, their partners, family and friends in NSW. We provide:

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